



Catholic-inspired NGOs FORUM
Forum des ONG d'inspiration catholique

Networking proposal

Preamble

The growing complexity of global issues, the incapacity to deal with all of the related aspects, the reduction of resources and the many questions raised on organisational identities are clear invitations to review strategies, forms of collaboration and working methodologies. The striving for a better world has lost some of its naivety and calls for renewed professional efforts based on better analysis, integrated scientific knowledge, social expertise and ethical identity. It is clear that no single organisation can deal with all subjects and that we would therefore tend to limit our range of action to sharply focused targets. Yet, we also increasingly understand key issues in relation to their complexities which invite us to think and move beyond our organisational potential and range of action. This contradiction - amongst many other factors - weighs in on the organisational autonomy and financial continuity of civil society actors, whose very existence and continuity have become part of the challenge.

The new encyclical **Caritas in Veritate** is another strong invitation to prepare for change. The document clearly highlights how much the context of international trade and finance imposes on the national structures that have long served as frameworks for identity, social protection and economic growth. It shows how State sovereignty and State political power have been greatly affected while stressing the present need for global vision and governance. It emphasizes a strong willingness for new solutions that need “to be found together in the light of an integral vision of man, reflecting the different aspects of the human person, contemplated through a lens purified by charity” (*Caritas in Veritate* 32). This call for action and change along with the many references to our responsibility in the *polis*, raises the question of whether our structures and methods are still adequate to respond to these new challenges.

All this tends to indicate that there is a growing need to look forward and to embrace change while abandoning older approaches. This calls for courage, increased creativity and new resources.

The first forum meeting held two years ago was already fuelled by the understanding that more effective ways of presence and action would need to be developed. Although that first meeting displayed the many differences and challenges, participating organisations agreed upon a continued effort and further search for improved collaboration. The mapping of the various Catholic inspired actors in their relevant actions and thematic interests was a first step in this direction. The result to which more than 80% of the organisations had contributed, illustrates where we are present and where we are absent; it displays a panorama of political activities in more than 25 identified topics – all of which have potential for new synergies. The second forum meeting aims at defining together an interactive mechanism that will continuously invite organisations to share ideas and to develop the most useful collaborative efforts.

A Catholic inspired network

Although networking is not new, its importance must still be stressed. Though there is scope for further improvement, it is already part of our organisational contact plans and strategies. This fact immediately raises two simple questions: what need is there for another network and what would be the added value of a Catholic network? These questions implicitly refer to the more fundamental question of whether we need well-identified Catholic structures, organisations and institutions - very often regarded as Catholic blocs- or whether we need to become involved in other platforms and ensure a Catholic presence in the many existing networks and platforms. It is not our aim to provide a clear cut answer, but rather to suggest that the answer to that question can be found in the different benefits that each path can bring rather than in an exclusive approach. We definitely need to resource our specifically Catholic activity better and therefore share the Catholic vision with others while also interacting more effectively with others in the rapidly changing environment. What we experience today is that Catholic institutions tend to lose their identity in the competitive and liberal mechanisms that rule our societies. It is also noted that Catholic entities participating in and contributing to the many existing platforms are also at risk of losing important aspects of their identity. We have all experienced that the grey zones of compromise are not necessarily warrants for improved solutions. Furthermore, since we all agree on the need for collaborative efforts and even more on the moral need for such collaboration, we also implicitly recognize the need for collaboration on those issues that are proper to our Christian vision and our way of participating within the *polis*. The very basic level of this collaboration calls for organized and well-focused dialogue. Diversity in such dialogue is both unavoidable and welcome: it is a wealth, a challenge and most importantly, an integral part of our organisational cultures. Past decades have shown that all this seems to bring us together just as much as it separates us. ***Developing the collaborative way forward will therefore need to be on the basis of shared goals and common strategies, rather than on a strictly institutional basis.***

Networking calls for flexible and committed relationships

Existing organisational cultures and decision-making processes have proven their validity but have also shown that they sometimes act as brakes in the dynamic processes that are today urgently required. This does not mean that we would agree to start a process that would invite participating organisations to modify their internal structures: that would not only take too long but could also do more harm than good. Networking strategies aim at linking on an ad hoc basis those forces that are most useful in achieving specific goals. Such strategies connect and encourage many of the civil society actors to achieve better cohesion: they also offer a way to temporarily link NGOs not only amongst themselves, but also with academics and even with economic entities. Interactive networking therefore needs to be built on a very flexible basis. This flexibility will also need to guarantee that dynamics are generated without imposing changes in the organisational culture but rather aiming to define commitment to the scheme and to the partners in the network. If institutional change should prove useful, the change would still remain part of an internal process of normal organisational growth that gradually integrates the logics of the new partnerships and the set targets. A network is therefore first and foremost a decision to commitment. Its success or failure would become largely dependent on the level of participation and the quality of commitment to achieve the identified and shared goals. The forum of the Catholic inspired organisations has defined itself as ***a dynamic space for exchanges and strategic alliances on specific topics shared by a number of Catholic-inspired organisations with the aim to increase the impact of the Christian message in the public debate.***

Networks are defined by their level of voluntary participation and commitment. The goals, methodology and the agenda of such dynamic units are defined by the participating organisations, the

resources and the focus of interest. The premises for our collaboration as a network are the political inter-governmental agenda, the Catholic identity and the existing organisational culture in all its diversity. In further discussing this issue, the Working Group agreed that the Catholic inspired network could be defined by these three corner stones: *the participating organisations, the Social Doctrine of the Church* and *the inter-governmental agendas*.

Goals of the forum: why are we acting together?

The forum of Catholic inspired organisations intends to focus on a selection of policies related to the intergovernmental and global political agenda. It does not aim to interfere with possible operational choices of the various organisations, nor does it plan to invest in organizing operational collaboration. Its main goal is to strengthen the policy activities and to enhance the impact of the Catholic voice in the many intergovernmental debates.

The proposal therefore aims at a change in mentality as much as at stimulating the building of common strategies including a network communication strategy. Within such a framework, the institutional representative value of the participating organisations becomes second to the expertise brought into the discussions.

Why are we acting together?

- Enhance the impact of the Christian/Catholic message in the public debate of intergovernmental environments
- Affirm more clearly our orientations, values and identity as Catholic inspired organisations
- Discern and design more effective ways of presence and action as Catholic inspired organisations;
- Develop a culture of collaboration in the political field in order to facilitate common political (inter)action.

What is the Forum not trying to do?

- Create a new governing structure
- Organize paralyzing coordinating mechanisms
- Interfere with the decision-making process of any organisation
- Coordinate operational efforts and activities
- Build the forum to act as another NGO
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Participants: Who are the actors?

Discussions after the first forum made clear that the invitations for the next forum – and for any dynamic process that would be started subsequently – should aim to include as many as possible of the Catholic-inspired international organizations politically interacting with intergovernmental organizations. The working group discussed this issue again and the following criteria were

established. We also agreed that any request to be invited to the next forum would be given serious consideration.

Established criteria

- Being of Catholic- Inspiration and interacting with one or more intergovernmental institutions
- Having an active relationship with an inter-governmental structure: The participating organisation needs to have representative structures / members in an international (or global) environment. (It is not the international scope of operational work that is relevant in the selection but rather the political interaction with one or more specific intergovernmental structures).

Criteria are not meant to exclude but rather to secure participation of those international Catholic inspired organisations active within the international political field and interested in collaboration between them and with the Holy See. It is also obvious that when exploring the potential of the thematic collaboration, criteria can be further refined to include all Catholic inspired organisations that usefully contribute to the goals set.

How could this network work?

The mapping exercise identified eight major themes the Catholic inspired organisations are involved in. Bringing these organisations together on the basis of well-identified targets is the next important step in building and strengthening collaboration. This cannot be imposed but needs to emerge naturally among the interested organizations. Some initiatives have already been taken in the cities where multilateral organizations have their headquarters, and it is our aim to see these initiatives grow to become policy dynamics.

The choice of goals and of a working methodology per thematic group is for the participating organisations to determine. This is also true for the identification of the inviting party or leading agency.

Although it is obvious that at the start much of this work will be carried out by the organizations themselves, it will be necessary to identify **an expert** who will be the reference person both for the thematic group and for the whole network. He /she will animate the collaborative effort, aim at a qualitative analytical approach and seek to arrive at a position which will subsequently be shared with all forum participants.

The expert will:

- Help define the specific goals of the groups
- Help to identify clear targets and the related agenda.
- Serve as a reference person / chair of the dynamic.
- Serve as a reference person on the theme
- Organize regular communications in the network
- Contribute to an interdisciplinary panel (think tank)

The working group also discussed the need for a **‘network facilitator’** who would maintain contacts with all organisations, stimulate to achieve progress, who could contribute to expand the collaboration potential, identify the useful links and clusters and build a communication strategy. He/she would also act as a permanent contact for all organisations. Though there is unanimous feeling such a position

would be highly useful, means have not yet been identified. Awaiting this possibility, the secretariat will continue to function as a logistic support.

The facilitator will:

- **Maintain contacts with all organizations to facilitate and stimulate exchanges and goal setting.**
- **Identify useful links and potential clusters of collaboration**
- **Contribute to interdisciplinary analysis and strategy building**
- **Contribute to building a communication strategy and help voicing common viewpoints, communications and concerns.**
- **Interact with the Secretariat of State and the permanent representatives of the H. See to the intergovernmental institutions on the subjects and goals identified and the positions suggested/taken**
- **Be part of the interdisciplinary expert meeting**
- **Develop and update the web site**
- ...

Establishing a Think tank

Forum meetings will be continued. However, given their high cost, it is suggested that these meetings be held every four years and that more strategic meetings would be organized in between. These **inter-disciplinary meetings** would bring the experts together to share and report on the progress made towards the respective goals, and also to exchange on policies with representatives of the Secretariat of State, the Permanent Observers to the inter-governmental institutions and the representatives of the various Dicasteries. This level of dialogue will contribute to a more coherent approach in the various themes as well as offer a platform of exchange that offers space for broader thinking. A think tank of this kind will undoubtedly be beneficial for all as it would identify trends at a global level even beyond what is discussed on the political agenda. It could become the unique place of inter thematic political dialogue and inter organisational encounters at purely policy levels.

Organizing meetings inviting forum participants only at four-yearly intervals may leave the impression that continuity is not sufficiently secured. We believe a network is first of all driven by its regular and methodological exchanges. Depending on the progress of the various thematic clusters, on the political agenda or simply on the methodological need for these organisations to meet within the range of a specific theme and at a specific moment, thematic forum meetings may also be organized. It seems furthermore obvious that Catholic centres can play an important role in bringing organisations together on a more geographical basis and it is conceivable that the expert meeting decides to organize a forum meeting before the four-year period has elapsed. Last but not least, it is felt that the expert meeting and the collaborative method decided upon by the various interested parties, the work of the network facilitator and the updating of a web site will largely contribute to further bridge the gap between two more general forum meetings.

It may also be useful to emphasize again that thematic networking is done on a voluntary basis and that the interaction remains open to all newcomers, just as the possibility for generating new groupings on other specific goals remains a logical part of the networking activity. Themes and groups may rapidly see their contributing participants change. What seems important is not the identity of the participating organisations but their expertise and their responsibility in contributing to achieve the goals set in common agreement.

Thematic groups: first steps

1. Our upcoming forum meeting includes specific sessions that will cover the various themes that have been identified in the mapping. These sessions mainly serve the purpose of identifying together the goals and the means/targets as explained in the session guidelines. They also aim to identify the first steps in bridging the period from now until the next forum meeting, while securing the launch/continuity of a process in between.
2. The initiative is then left to the organisations who will define a working methodology, a working agenda and a communication strategy to keep the forum network informed on the proceedings via the facilitator. The frequency of these exchanges, thematic meetings and targeted communications will depend on the defined working methodology and the initiative of the participating organisations.
3. Expert meetings are held twice a year to discuss progress within the field of the various themes and to exchange on more general strategies. These meetings will not only include the experts per theme but also representatives of the Secretariat of State, the dicasteries and the Permanent Observers to the inter-governmental institutions. These meetings will keep an informal character and rather aim at exchanging ideas while brain storming and reflecting on important political and policy issues.
4. The Working Group has also suggested a method to better focus our work from the Catholic perspective and therefore approach the various themes mainly on four core elements of the social doctrine: Common Good; Subsidiarity; Solidarity and the Human Person. By viewing the various thematic challenges in these terms, we will undoubtedly further contribute to the daily translations of our Christian vision. (cfr the grid).
5. Existing Catholic centres or any geographic grouping of organizations may largely contribute to the process of these thematic networks. Their contribution can vary from simple logistic support to owning one of the thematic dynamics in this process.
6. The Working Group concludes its task with the second forum meeting.

If we agree on the urgent need for more collaboration, broader vision and continued interaction; if we decide to overcome a basic reaction meant to secure the short term continuity of our organisations; if instead we want to focus on the longer term challenges including the building of new political and social mechanisms that will make a difference, we believe networking may be the most appropriate invitation to unite our efforts.

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