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CO-ORDINATION OF THE HANDLING OF PUBLIC HUMAN RIGHTS INFORMATION
BETWEEN EUROPEAN BASED ORGANISATIONS AND
INSTITUTIONS SPECIALISING IN HUMAN RIGHTS

European Co-ordination Committee

First meeting
5 June 1981,
Council of Europe headquarters,
Strasbourg

I. INTRODUCTION

The European Co-ordination Committee on human rights documentation, held its first meeting on 5 June 1981, at the Council of Europe's headquarters, Strasbourg.

The meeting was convened by the Directorate of Human Rights of the Council of Europe and was opened by Mr Frits HONDIUS, Deputy to the Director of Human Rights.

The proceedings and summary of the conclusions of the meeting are set out below, after a brief description of the background to the Co-ordination Committee's creation.

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II. BACKGROUND

A meeting of human rights experts and information scientists was convened in Strasbourg on 2 and 3 February 1981 by the Directorate of Human Rights of the Council of Europe to discuss the possibilities of co-ordination of the handling of public human rights information between European based organisations and institutions specialising in human rights.

At that meeting, it was recommended (1) :

1. that a resource guide or guides on public human rights information should be produced and circulated, containing up-dated references of publications and collections on human rights and on the accessibility of such documentation to potential users.
 2. that an expert working group should be established to review existing thesauri and classification systems in the field of human rights, in order to provide a framework of classification which could bridge existing systems used by the wide variety of organisations concerned. Experience drawn from outside Europe was essential in this regard.
 3. the establishment of a regional co-ordination committee in Western Europe which would combine in its membership, the experience of a variety of organisations and information techniques, both manual and automated, mandated to develop an effective network of human rights information services. The committee would be responsible for the promotion of comprehensive and compatible systems and ensuring the provision of adequate training facilities for users.
 4. that the Co-ordinating Committee should examine the feasibility and desirability of establishing a nucleus (or several) to serve as a Western European reference unit(s) within the network as a whole and of appointing a liaison officer for contacting and advising the various documentation centres.
 5. that a link should be maintained between the expert committee, the Western European Co-ordinating Committee and the International Working Group for HURIDOCs to advance human rights documentation in the world as a whole.
 6. that all organisations and institutions concerned with the protection and promotion of human rights should be encouraged to participate in a positive programme of sharing, networking and making available public information about human rights violations, case law and legislation, both national and international, protection techniques, educational
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1. The summary of the conclusions of that meeting (doc. DH/Inf-Co (81) 1) may be obtained on request from the Directorate of Human Rights, Council of Europe, BP 431 R6, 67006 Strasbourg Cedex.

programmes, documentation or publications, and to facilitate such activities by making every effort to use and develop compatible information systems and to provide facilities for information sharing wherever possible.

The expert working group, known as the International Expert Group: the Human Rights Thesaurus, has begun work on the elaboration of a Human Rights Thesaurus, the first draft of which should be available in Spring 1982.

The European Co-ordination Committee comprises, in accordance with the recommendations made at the aforementioned meeting, experts from the following organisations and institutions: Council of Europe, European Parliament, United Nations Library, Amnesty International, SIM, the Peace Research Institute, Inter-Parliamentary Union, Pax Christi International, Diakonisches Werk des Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland, HURIDOCS, EIP, the Henri Dunant Institute.

In accordance with the wish expressed at the February meeting, the Directorate of Human Rights of the Council of Europe acts as convener of the Co-ordination Committee.

Both the International Expert Group: the Human Rights Thesaurus and the European Co-ordination Committee are autonomous in character.

III. PROCEEDINGS OF THE FIRST MEETING OF THE CO-ORDINATION COMMITTEE

Mr Frits Hondius, Deputy to the Director of Human Rights, opened the meeting and welcomed participants.

The Committee was informed of developments since the meeting of 2 and 3 February 1981 within the International Working Group for HURIDOCS (Human Rights International Documentation System) and, in particular, of the possibility of organising a meeting of Latin American experts in autumn 1981 with a view to developing co-ordination in that region. It was also hoped that further regional meetings could be organised in Africa, the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

Information was also given on the work of the International Expert Group: the Human Rights Thesaurus, which had held its first meeting on 2 June 1981 on the premises of the United Nations Library, Geneva. The Committee was given an approximate timetable for the completion of a first preliminary version of the Human Rights Thesaurus, namely Spring 1982.

With regard to the possibility of setting up a Human Rights Documentation Centre in the Directorate of Human Rights of the Council of Europe, the Committee was informed that no final decision had as yet been taken by the competent bodies of the Council of Europe. The Committee was hopeful that a positive response would be given to the proposal so that the documentation centre could become operational as soon as possible.

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Following this exchange of information, the Committee tackled the two main questions on its agenda, namely: the Committee's terms of reference and the extent to which co-ordination of the handling of public human rights information can be achieved within resources available in Europe. To facilitate the discussion, the Committee had before it a discussion paper prepared by Ms Friederike Knabe (HURIDOCS) at the request of the Directorate of Human Rights (doc. DH/Inf-Co (81) 3) and suggestions made by Professor van Dijk (SIM) on the possible techniques of achieving co-ordination. (1)

i. Terms of reference of the European Co-ordination Committee

As agreed at the meeting of 2 and 3 February 1981, the Committee was to determine the scope of its mandate. It did so as follows:

Title of committee:	European Co-ordination Committee on Human Rights Documentation.
Source of mandate and Accountability:	Meeting of European based organisations and institutions specialising in human rights.
Convenor of committee:	Directorate of Human Rights of the Council of Europe.
Membership:	Experts from the Council of Europe, European Parliament, United Nations (Library), Inter-Parliamentary Union, Pax Christi International (IPIS), Amnesty International, SIM, Henri Dunant Institute, EIP, Peace Research Institute, Diakonisches Werk der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland, HURIDOCS.
Objectives:	In accordance with international human rights instruments, to stimulate and to facilitate the co-ordination of information handling between European based organisations, institutions and individuals with particular interest in human rights.
Methods: -	To provide a framework for the communication and exchange of public information on human rights and to enhance co-ordination between existing and developing documentation and information centres in this field;

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1. These papers may be obtained on request from the Directorate of Human Rights, Council of Europe, BP 431 R6, 67006 Strasbourg Cedex.

- to invite the participation of all interested organisations and institutions in the proposed framework;

- to inform at regular intervals, by appropriate means, those involved in Europe in the handling of human rights information about developments in the classification and retrieval of public human rights information;

- to encourage the use of similar and compatible systems for the classification and retrieval of public human rights information.

Type of activity:

- to provide, where possible, information, advice and assistance;

- to make recommendations;

- to liaise with other functional or regional groups or committees;

- to encourage liaison on an inter-regional basis.

ii. The extent to which co-ordination can be achieved within resources available in Europe

The Committee considered the extent to which co-ordination can be achieved within resources available in Europe as well as its role in stimulating such co-ordination and reviewing progress.

It recognised the limitations of co-operation in this area due to the different structures (IGOs, NGOs, academic etc), backgrounds, interests, needs and resources of the organisations and institutions concerned.

Rather than impose some centralised form of networking according to which a central body or nucleus would be appointed to act inter alia, as a referral centre and in which information would be pooled and classified, the Committee thought that a more decentralised, pragmatic approach would be more suitable. Such an approach would not exclude that, at a later stage, some central co-ordinating body would grow out of the network itself, as user confidence developed. The Committee was also aware that over-decentralisation would probably not achieve the objective desired, since it would result in a cumbersome and onerous structure. A proper balance would therefore have to be struck between centralisation and decentralisation. It felt that, given the different specialist fields of concern of the variety of institutions and organisations involved, this could be achieved by developing a certain specialist responsibility among a number of organisations and institutions.

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Self-interest would be an important element in developing such responsibility those concerned being encouraged to make their resources accessible and useful to others in the system, to stimulate others into contributing their resources and to fill information gaps, in order to benefit from information in other specialist fields. As user confidence built up, those concerned would be encouraged to adhere to and further contribute to the information sharing. The result should be a decentralised regional network with linkages between contributors and users at different levels according to their resources and interests (some co-operating at a very loose level, others to a greater degree) and an "inner network" of organisations and institutions, with specialist responsibility in given areas, who would have the responsibility of processing information, maintaining collections and providing reference and other documentation services within the network and outside.

The Committee felt that the first task was to ensure that the preliminary survey of human rights collections in Western Europe carried out by HURIDOCS should be developed, completed and made available as a "Directory of Human Rights Documentation Collections in Western Europe" providing details on specialist collections and classification systems, so that information on existing collections would be available on how to access them. The next stage was to identify areas of potential specialist responsibility, to stimulate such responsibility among a number of organisations and institutions and to encourage others to contribute their information to the appropriate specialist "centre". The Co-ordination Committee therefore saw its task as one of stimulation and integration, picking out developments and integrating them into the linkages in the network. In order to assume this task it should take the necessary steps to make its existence known to all interested organisations and institutions. Visibility was indeed an important element for the success of this endeavour. It was therefore decided that the present summary of proceedings should be given the widest possible circulation.

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The Co-ordination Committee felt that it could not advance further in its considerations until the Directory was available and until the work on the Thesaurus, which was important from both the point of view of classification and retrieval, had progressed. It was therefore agreed that the next meeting of the Co-ordination Committee would take place in Strasbourg on 14 December 1981.