



INTERNATIONAL GAY AND LESBIAN
HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
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UN UPDATE

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LGBT NGOs and Consultative Status at the United Nations in 2008

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“Aren’t we headed towards the extinction of the human race?” Pakistan asked in regards to the mission of COC, a national Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) human rights group in The Netherlands applying for NGO consultative status with the United Nations. The question reflects the hostility faced by LGBT NGOs in the review process for gaining consultancy status. But the story is not all grim. During 2008, while applications from groups in Brazil (ABGLT) and Switzerland (L’Estime) were deferred for evaluation until 2009, COC Netherlands and FELGT Spain received consultative status at the United Nations.

Consultative status is a key means for civil society to access the UN system; for example, it enables NGOs to deliver oral and written reports at UN meetings, and organize events on UN premises. LGBT groups with such status are able to speak out in this important international forum about abuses and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

The UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) consists of 54 member states and grants consultative status to NGOs after reviewing recommendations made by a subsidiary body—the Committee on Non-

Governmental Organizations—comprised of 19 Member States.

The NGO Committee evaluates applications from NGOs based on ECOSOC Resolution 1996/31. The process can include questions from Committee delegates and answers from NGO representatives, both in writing and orally, at the NGO Committee sessions in New York.

During its first session in 2008 (January 23-30), the NGO Committee made a negative recommendation regarding the application from FELGT Spain. Seven countries voted for consultative status (Columbia, Dominica, Israel, Peru, Romania, UK, US) and seven countries voted against (Burundi, China, Egypt, Pakistan, Qatar, Russia, Sudan); four countries abstained (Angola, Guinea, India, Turkey) and Cuba was not present for the vote (Cuba’s delegate always leaves a room before a vote on an LGBT NGO).

During the second session in 2008 (May 29-June 6), the NGO Committee gave COC Netherlands a positive recommendation for consultative status. Countries voted the same as in January except for Burundi, which abstained. As a result, the vote was 7-6.

At its meeting on July 21-22, 2008, ECOSOC granted special consultative status to both COC Netherlands and FELGT Spain. ECOSOC followed the positive recommendation of the NGO Committee regarding COC Netherlands and overturned the negative recommendation for FELGT Spain.

Few LGBT NGOs have been granted this status in the last few years and all of them have followed the same path: negative recommendation from the NGO Committee, subsequently overturned by ECOSOC; they are LBL Denmark, LSVD Germany, CGL Quebec, RFSL Sweden, and ILGA-Europe.

Among the 3000 NGOs with consultative status at the UN only a handful are LGBT groups. In addition to those mentioned above, the US-based International Wages Due Lesbians and Australia-based Coalition of Activist Lesbians have had consultative status for years. The International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) succeeded

in its effort to gain entry to the UN in the early nineties only to be stripped of that status at the urging of US Senator Jesse Helms.

In addition to the deferred applications from ABGLT Brazil and L'Estime from Switzerland, there are a number of applications pending with the NGO Committee from NGOs in Argentina, Austria, Chile, Switzerland, Zimbabwe, and the United States (including one from IGLHRC). Several of these will be reviewed by the NGO Committee in 2009.

The questions from opponent states tend to associate LGBT people and their NGOs with pedophilia. Supportive states stress that there can be no discrimination against any NGOs, including LGBT voices. The strongest supporter in the NGO Committee, the United Kingdom, repeatedly stated a guiding principle: "we may disagree with an NGO, but we should not exclude them [from participation in the work of the UN]."

