



INFOCON FIRST PROGRESS REPORT

For:

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Section 1 – Project Objectives

1.1. Overview of general project objectives

INFOCON is the unique result of extensive consultations and discussions between members of civil society (notably groups or individuals representing transnational communities and NGOs working in the field of minority rights or conflict resolution) and leading scholars in various disciplines. The overall objective of the project is to create a better understanding of how Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) representing Transnational Communities (TCs) can help in preventing and resolving conflicts in Europe and the world. Furthermore, the project strives to attain the following objectives:

1. Provide recommendations and strategic tools for CSOs: in order to increase the efficiency and involvement of CSOs in the elaboration of policies related to transnational communities and active in conflict- or development-sensitive fields, INFOCON includes a specific objective of formulating sound recommendations and strategic tools based on the project's research results.

2. Verify past research on TCs and their role and impact in conflict: with the benefit of CSOs' experience and their involvement in the research process, INFOCON strives to shed new light on past research results. This specific objective also addresses the current gap between civil society knowledge and academic expertise that treated transnational communities merely as objects of research.

3. Produce new insights into the dynamics and current potential role of CSOs in different conflicts: by elaborating new and innovative comparisons of TCs across Europe and the world, INFOCON desires to advance the scientific knowledge on the underlying phenomena and therefore contribute to a better understanding of conflicts and transnational social networks.

4. Provide conflict-sensitive policy recommendations: in order to enhance current conflict policy and to use the leverage and opportunities that transnational community CSOs offer in the field of conflict and peace, INFOCON will elaborate relevant and comprehensive policy recommendation to policy-makers at the European, national and local level.

INFOCON will address limitations in the current state of the art by implementing an innovative approach on three fronts: (1) A unique integration of CSO actors in the research process, (2) consolidation of past research and cross- fertilization among different disciplines, and (3) innovative focus on the role of transnational communities in conflicts. Each of these aspects will contribute to a better understanding of the underlying phenomena and constitute promising directions for future research.

The participating CSOs display a considerable degree of diversity with respect to their knowledge on the issues addressed by INFOCON. Yet, most organisations have carried out or at least tempted to carry out their own research on the role of minorities, immigrants or diaspora in the conflicts of origin (e.g. SMS has collaborated with

undergraduate students on research on immigrant communities; MRGI frequently publishes country reports on conflicts in countries of origin). However, the scientific knowledge on transnational communities has been hardly accessible for these CSOs so that the results of rigorous interdisciplinary research on transnational communities have not yet been included in their activities. This is of course in part due to the fact that this research has not yet been carried out, and to the absence of CSOs in past research programmes. Frequently cited reasons for the absence of large scale research programmes have been insufficient funding and a lack of co-operation with the scientific community.

What is more, the interdisciplinary approach of INFOCON will offer comprehensive visions of “the big picture” that CSOs are confronted with. No scientific project has yet offered a comprehensive overview on the multiple issues and intertwined problems that conflicts pose to civil society actors. By carrying out rigorous academic research and translating the results into CSO language, INFOCON will significantly contribute to the enhancement of the knowledge of CSO participants.

1.2. Research objectives for the first 6 months

The implementation of the research strategy can be divided into a preparatory phase, a fieldwork phase and a summarising phase. During the preparatory phase, fieldwork that is to begin in January 2009, is prepared in conceptual and methodological terms (work package 1). Furthermore, “mini” case study reports are set up by the case experts for September 30, 2008 with the help of the case study guidelines. Finally, the target groups for interviews/focus group discussions in the regions of origin and the cities of settlement are identified and characterised with the help of a list of actors.

The Work Package 1 aims at the development of multi-disciplinary comparative methods involving a mixture of quantitative, qualitative and participatory approaches in order to produce (1) academically sound and policy relevant research results and (2) ensure the overall comparability of the selected case studies. During the first phase of the research project, the systematic collection of information on the Transnational Communities under examination both in their region of origin (Great Lakes region, Turkey and Kosovo) as well as in four European cities of settlement (Amsterdam, Berlin, Brussels and London) stands at the centre of activity. The envisaged result is the production of seven case study reports on the three regions of origin and the four cities of settlement by the respective case specialists in the INFOCON team.

Fieldwork will start from January 2009 onwards and last until August 2009. On the one hand, the specialists for each case will generate data in the regions of origin/cities. On the other, the work package leaders of WP 3, 4 and 5 will start the work on their respective work packages. The results of field-work will feed into the final version of the seven case study reports by the relevant case specialists which will be analysed in a comparative manner by the research direction and presented in the form of Deliverable 2 in June 2009.

Section 2 – INFOCON progress in its first 6 months

2.1 Work Package 1

Sent to the DG Research at the European Commission on 28th of August 2008 and published at the INFOCON website (www.infocon-project.org), *Deliverable 1* entitled *Case Study Guidelines* constitutes the output of INFOCON's first work package under the lead of the Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL). Its overall objective is the creation of a common base of knowledge and research methods for a very diverse consortium. In the context of a team that is made up of CSO partners – partly representing opposed transnational communities – on the one hand, and researchers – specialised in a variety of disciplines – on the other, it is of special importance to create common terms of reference and guidelines for research.

In order to set up the case study guidelines, the research direction proceeded in a two-step approach: First, guidelines for "mini" case study reports have been distributed to all INFOCON participants during the kick-off meeting by the end of May 2008. The partners then had one month to send feedback on the preliminary version of the guidelines to the research direction. The feedback has been used to set up the revised guidelines. These will serve the researchers as orientation for the production of short and descriptive case study reports based on secondary sources on their assigned city/region of origin for September 30, 2008.

The underlying logic of the "mini" case study reports was threefold: (1) help the research direction to set up a draft version of the transversal interview grids to be used during fieldwork in the countries of origin / cities of settlement; (2) orient the methodological preparation of fieldwork by providing a general overview on the situation in the country of origin/settlement, and (3) allow for revision of the intermediate case study reports at an early stage of the project in view of the comparative presentation of all case studies in Deliverable 2 and a possible joint publication.

In view of the fieldwork that will be conducted from January 2009 onwards, the research direction has set up a list of actors (distributed to all partners in August 2008) as a supplement to the guidelines for the case study reports. This list serves two major purposes: the identification and the characterization of relevant TC actors in the country of origin and the country of settlement. First, with the help of this list, research performers identify the relevant interview partners in their respective city/region of origin from September 2008 onwards. The contacts established should build a solid working relationship and allow for the testing of the transversal interview grids before the beginning of fieldwork. Second, the list of actors serves the overall aim of comparability by enabling an accurate characterisation and categorization of the relevant TC actors in the countries of origin/settlement. Accordingly, it will allow for a pertinent selection of interviewees so that representativity of all fieldwork is ensured.

2.2 Interactive INFOCON Internet Platform

The Interactive INFOCON Internet Platform is a key communication channel for the project's dissemination.

Its main idea is offering an innovative virtual space dedicated to and constructed in consultation with transnational community organisations. As countless studies show, the employment of innovative IT channels is extremely adequate and highly effective to reach un-organised and dispersed communities who often rely on E-Mail and internet as means of communication. In addition, given the international scope of this project, the internet would seem to be the best way to reunite members of different communities across the globe and allow for a genuine expression of their opinions. The transnational community organisations will be able to use the platform to present themselves in tailored spaces and exchange information on relevant issues among each other and with the research communities. The internet platform will therefore make use of innovative Web 2.0 technological features to incite active participation and frequent visits of the community for which INFOCON creates knowledge. The virtual space will also include a discussion panel for individual members of transnational communities in order to allow them to contribute to and take part in public debate.

The development of the INFOCON Internet Platform started by the beginning of July 2008, when the project's IT manager carried research work on new technologies in order to offer a communication tool built from the most up-to-date web features. By this time, the INFOCON Internet Platform development rate goes up to 40%.

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying the INFOCON Internet Platform. The browser's address bar shows the URL `http://0.0.0.0:3000/`. The website header includes the logo "platform the INFOCON project internet platform" and a welcome message for "Thomas Blumenfeld" with a "Sign out" link and an "Admin view" link. A navigation menu contains links for "Home", "Profile", "Contacts", "Messages", "Blog", "People", "Groups", and "Forum". Below the menu is a "World Map" section featuring a Google Maps interface with a "Plan" button and a "Powered by Google" logo. To the right of the map is a "Sponsored by" section with the INFOCON logo and the years "2007 - 2013". Below that is a "Search People" section with a search input field and a "Search" button. Further down is a "Contacts" section with a user profile icon and a link to "All contacts". At the bottom left, there is a link to "Agrandir le plan" and a section for "Activity Feed".

The following features are fully operational by now:

Accounting System (Secure Login, Password Reminder, activation e-mail, Account Settings)

The website allows users to register, given a password and a valid e-mail. A password reminder is also available. After they register, an activation e-mail is sent. Users can are able as well to edit their account settings: they can set their e-mail, change their password and authorize e-mail notifications for messages or contact requests.

Profile

Users can edit their profile information. They can edit their name as well as their description.

Photos

Users can upload photos. They can set one as their avatar (primary photo that is displayed to represent them on the website).

Blogs

People can edit their blog (add, edit or delete posts).

Contacts

Users can visit other users' profile and make a contact request. The user who has been requested for contact can then accept or refuse it. At any moment, a user can disable contacts from his network.

Messages

Users can exchange messages within each other. Each user has a mailbox where he can see his incoming messages, his sent messages as well as his deleted messages.

Activity logging

User actions are registered and are displayed at selected places on the website. User's contact activity is displayed in user's profiles, and user can delete their activity logs.

Comments

Users can comment blog posts and walls (a user's wall is his profile page).

Forums

Users can use forums to communicate; they can create discussion topics and post text entries.

Groups

Users can create groups. A group has a logo, a name and a description. Users can join groups and group administrator can manage group members and settings. A group is provided

automatically with a web space so organizations can create their website with the internet platform.

At September 29th 2008, the INFOCON's Project Manager as well as the project's IT Manager went to Bonn in order to present the advancements on the internet platform to the *Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC)*, member of the DIASPEACE Consortium. The idea is to foster cooperation between the two sister projects, so the internet platform could be supported by both consortia, improving its conditions of sustainability. BICC representatives showed enthusiasm on the platform progress.

Section 3 – Project management

3.1 Preliminary remarks on INFOCON management

While being well aware of the numerous advantages inherent in a multidisciplinary research project uniting researchers and CSO representatives from different countries, we should not forget about the various challenges that INFOCON faces at its beginning.

For reasons beyond our control, INFOCON has received its pre-financing from the EC by the end of August, considering that its contractual starting date is the 1st of April. It is obvious, given a funding delay of 5 months, that the consortium will only with difficulty reach all (research) objectives as timely and comprehensively as initially foreseen in the Technical Annex (n° I). Furthermore, the delay will have serious consequences for the planned fieldwork, since most universities could only employ research personnel by early September. Nevertheless, the management and research direction are confident that by uniting forces, creative solutions can be found in time.

Next, it has to be mentioned that the very nature of an interdisciplinary project bears several challenges that have to be borne in mind throughout the entire duration of the project. For instance, in the light of diverging disciplinary backgrounds, how can we achieve a genuine integration of methods in one common and coherent project instead of presenting a loose interposition of different "mini" projects? Furthermore, the composition of the consortium is not without complication as the kick-off meeting has lively shown. It can be argued that a certain amount of mutual uneasiness exists both on the side of the researchers and the CSO representatives (with regard to previous negative experiences, working methods, etc.). In which way can we create a functioning team that works hand in hand and creates mutually acceptable results? These are just some examples of the questions that we constantly have to ask and try to resolve during the project.

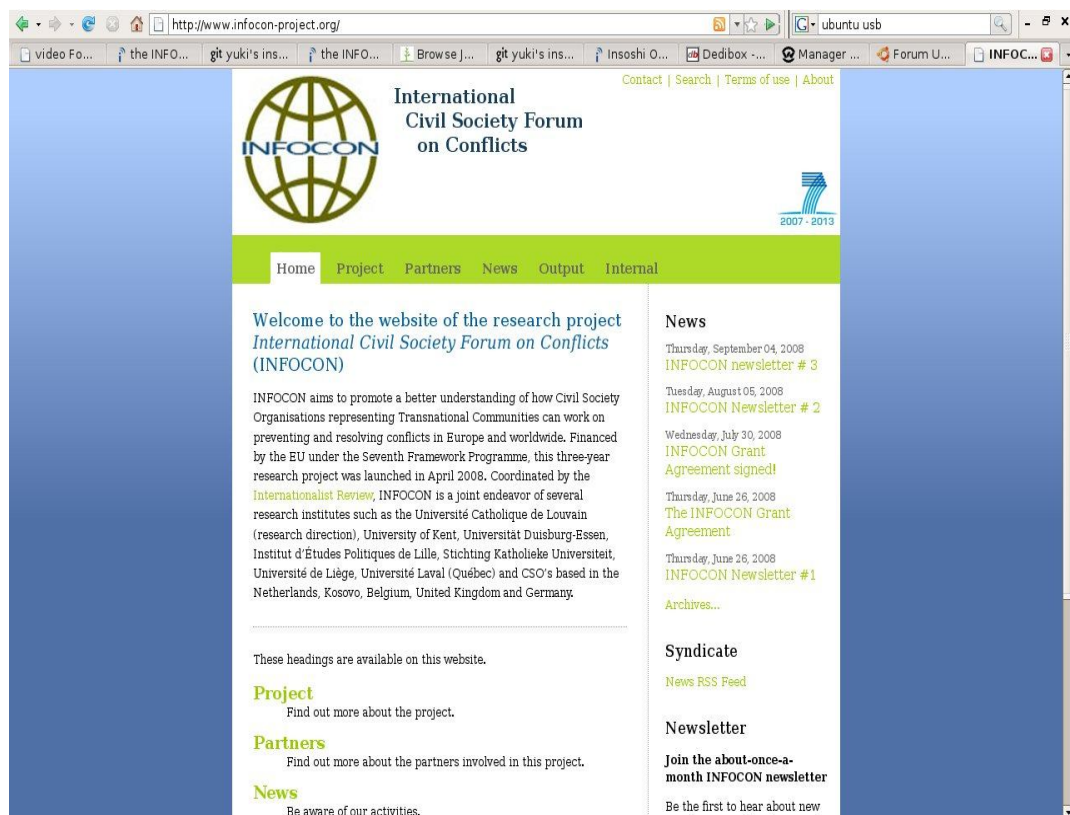
3.2 Short comments and information on co-ordination activities in the period

During this period, the Consortium Management has been carrying out the following activities:

- Conclusion of the INFOCON Grant Agreement's negotiation, which had entered into force the 17th of July 2008, and coordination of the beneficiaries accession to the Grant Agreement, collecting the duly signed Annex IV – Form A from all Consortium Members and delivering these to the European Commission before deadline expiration.
- Writing of the Consortium Agreement: several drafts have been revised upon comments made by partners. The CA had entered into force on 28 August 2008 and was sent to the European Commission.
- Preparation and organisation of the Kick-off meeting, held at the Kent University in Brussels, concluded May 27 2008, when the project was

exhaustively discussed and the Consortium Members found the opportunity to network and highlight the challenges within the project in further detail.

- Development of the project's website (www.infocon-project.org) as well as the INFOCON intranet, which is a protected website where project-related documents, important announcements and a discussion forum are found. It's an important tool to foster communication within INFOCON colleagues, engaging partners' interaction, improving documents accessibility and allowing the management of INFOCON related events and meetings by an online calendar. Recent changes have been made in order to improve the website's security and its navigation. Now, each partner has a personal profile and also a new section called General Bibliography was created to share and build up a common base of knowledge.



- A INFOCON/DIASPEACE joint intranet was set up in order to facilitate the share of research findings between the two sister projects and highlighting potential synergies with DIASPEACE by linking and promoting similar research interests and conceptual frame; commenting papers, discussion on conclusions/recommendations; joint dissemination, events & publications; etc. The INFOCON/DIASPEACE is hosted at <http://diaspace.infocon-project.org>. It requires the same username and password as the INFOCON intranet to login.

- Redaction of the about-a-month INFOCON newsletter, in which are published news on the progress of the project; the publication of research and policy working papers and policy briefs; events and calls for papers.

In addition, during this reporting period, several meetings were organized between CSOs performers, INFOCON's management staff and researchers, where members of diaspora communities and CSOs representatives gave their input on the preparation of the fieldwork, improving the project's network by offering contacts in their countries of origin as well as at their cities of settlement

As examples of the activities mentioned above:

- Meeting in Brussels with Prof. Jochen Hippler and Jan Hanrath, from the Duisburg-Essen University, when their participation in the INFOCON project was discussed in depth;
- Meeting with Marusca Perazzi, representing the Minority Rights Group, a leading minorities-specialized CSO based in London. They will host the first INFOCON Work Packages leaders meeting, in October;
- Meeting with Julia Ojanen, DIASPEACE representative, about the cooperation on the two sister projects' synergies;
- Marieke Van Houte, from the Centre for International Development Issues - Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, came to Brussels the 22nd of August and met Jana Schildt (INFOCON research director assistant), Christiaan De Beule, from S.O.S. Rwanda-Burundi (CSO member of INFOCON consortium), Aggée Shyaka Mugabe, doctoral student at the Université Catholique de Louvain and teacher at National University of Rwanda, and Felipe Angeli (INFOCON Project Manager). At the meeting, the field work in the Great Lakes region was discussed and the researcher from the Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen collected important information with Christiaan and Aggée, who shared all their expertise on that region.

Finally, the INFOCON Management Team started organizing the project's first conference, which will be held on April 2009, in Lille, with the collaboration of the Institute d'Études Politiques de Lille and Université Laval, from Québec, Canada. By the beginning of September, the INFOCON Project Manager, Felipe Angeli, and the project's research direction assistant, Jana Schildt, went to Lille and discussed with Pierre Mathiot, director of Sciences-Po Lille, about the first conference's organizational procedures. Oana Tranca, from the Université Laval, has been updated on this process and is working on the conference program, in cooperation with the Brussels team.

Section 4 - Outlook for the next 6 months

As reported above, the European Commission's delay in issuing the INFOCON Grant Agreement had several consequences for the implementation of the project, causing a later engagement of researchers at the Universities members of the INFOCON Consortium. For that reason, the research direction has decided to postpone several of the deadlines. Nevertheless, all measures have been taken in order to insure the respect to the project's deadlines and objectives.

The next relevant research coordination activity will be the INFOCON Work Packages' leaders meeting, which will be held on October 31st, at the Minority Rights Group headquarters in London, in order to prepare the fieldwork which will be conducted from January 2009 onwards.

As for providing an outlook for the next 6 months activities, an overview of deadlines is listed below:

- **September 30, 2008:** Submission of the seven "mini" case study reports by the responsible research teams to the research direction + submission of a document with concrete proposals on issues to be covered by interviews/focus groups and the kind of field research methods to be used by each WP lead to the research direction. These proposals will be posted on the internal website by the research direction and subject to discussion by all participants.
- **October 15, 2008:** Based on the input of the "mini" case study reports, the research direction submits a draft version of the transversal interview grids (for cities and regions or origin) to all partners for feedback.
- **September 2008:** The universities, together with the CSO partners, identify the relevant interview partners in their respective cities and regions of origin. Contacts should be established in order to have a solid working relationship for the field work. These relations should allow for testing the draft versions of the transversal interview grids.
- **October 25, 2008:** Deadlines for feedback to research direction on draft transversal interview grids.
- **November 5, 2008:** Distribution of revised transversal interview grids to all partners by the research direction.
- **November 30, 2008:** Deadline for testing and final feedback on transversal interview grids by all partners.

- **December 15 and 16, 2008:** During the second consortium meeting, the research direction presents the final version of the transversal interview grids and briefs all partners on field research methodology.
- **January 2009:** Beginning of field work in cities and regions of origin.
- **May 1, 2009:** Submission of final version of case study reports to the research direction.
- **June 2009:** Submission of Deliverable 2.1 by the research direction to the European Commission.