



# ICNGO AT UNESCO

Tish Collins, ACWW Chief Executive Officer

The International Conference of Non-Governmental Organisations is hosted every two years by the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation and provides NGOs in Consultative Status with UNESCO the opportunity to have input in the NGO Liaison Committee's agenda for the next term. In December 2016 Chief Executive Officer Tish Collins and Media & Communications Manager Nick Newland set off to Paris for the ICNGO, whose theme this year was 'The Challenge of the Digital Revolution for NGOs'.

The impressive headquarters building of UNESCO in Paris was the venue for this year's ICNGO, a short walk from the historic Eiffel Tower. Having travelled by Eurostar train the night before, we arrived at UNESCO in plenty of time for the opening session on Monday morning. Welcomed by Eric Falt, the UNESCO Assistant Director-General for External Relations and Public Information, we were greeted with some startling figures. In 1996, 1% of the world's population had internet access - by 2006 this number had reached 17%, and in 2016, 50% of the population had practical access to the internet. These 3.6 billion users send, on average, 2.5 million emails per second and more than 8,000 'tweets' are sent per second using social media app Twitter. These figures are vast, and support ACWW's increased use of digital interaction in the past year (*if you're interested, ACWW's website gets just over 700,000 visits a month, just from users directed to it via Facebook!*).

His Excellency Mr Darko Tanaskovic, Serbia's Permanent Delegate to UNESCO and Chair of the Committee on NGO Partners on the UNESCO Executive Board pointed out that 'multiculturalism' as an ideal, was permanently endangered by 'dark forces, including the emerging extremist right-wing politics of central Europe and the United States of America, as well as isolationism'. Instead, he said, we must strive for 'multiculturality', the true engagement and interaction of all cultures and backgrounds within our states, organisations and actions. This can be particularly facilitated by the use of digital integration and easy cross-border communications within civil society, NGOs and groups like ACWW's member societies.

Many people are resistant to the 'intrusion' of the internet and digital technology on their everyday lives. There is a fear of new things, along with a very reasonable concern about



▲ ACWW Chief Executive Officer Tish Collins (right) with Dr Rohani Hashim, Secretary General of the World Association of Industrial and Technological Research Organisations and ACWW Media & Communications Manager Nick Newland at the International Conference of NGOs, at UNESCO in Paris, December 2016

terms like 'fake news' and 'post-truth', whilst the hysteria that comes with frequent disasters, bad news and tragedies is exacerbated by the 24 hour a day, multi-platform news world we live in. A large amount of time at the Conference was spent discussing the ethics of the digital revolution, and interesting points made by many contributors - including those who questioned the intent and moral perspective of the major media companies like News International, Facebook and Google.

There was a feeling expressed by some within the body of the Conference that these organisations had a malevolent attitude towards NGOs, and lacked interest in global development - and should thus be resisted. Having discussed his point with me, Nick asked *"given the tone of the event, and the points raised about corporate responsibility and tax payments, was there any interest in inviting major technology or social media companies to this forum or follow up events to discuss more positive, productive interaction and action? If they are brought into the fold, there would be a greater level of trust - at the moment, they are winning and we are not - we would be stronger with them"*.

This was met with interest, and Giacomo Mazzone of the European Broadcasting Union responded that media companies tended to stay clear of engaging lest they have to commit to something - though the chairman of the panel did commit to inviting such companies to the following meetings in the 2016-2018 session.

ACWW made several other important points at the Conference, including Tish's request that the NGO Liaison Committee create an online resource bank, so that NGOs could contribute their working documents (which further the work on the Sustainable Development Goals and the UNESCO agenda) in various languages. This last element is particularly important as Indrajit Banerjee, Director of the Knowledge Societies Division, UNESCO Communication and Information Sector pointed out:

*"There are 6,000 recognised languages in the world, and 60-65% will be dead by the year 2100. Only around 400 languages are seen online"*

Other important statistics that emerged from the Conference include:

- 32.2 million children with no primary education, of whom 54% are girls
- 23.3 million children with no secondary education, of whom 53% are girls
- Digital access does not indicate digital ability or use; in Scotland, where there is near universal access to the internet, 20% of people have no ability to use it
- c.200 Tweets using #ICNGO to spread word of the conference, with 1500+ re-tweets and people forwarding the message. Of these, 52 Tweets were posted by ACWW - we received official thanks from the UNESCO media team at the end of the Conference for covering the discussion so thoroughly!
- 380 NGOs have status at UNESCO, representing 50 million worldwide. ACWW alone represents more than 9 million women, a significant percentage of this total representation (18%).

The final session of the Conference included the formal adoption of the working paper - the guidelines for all NGOs to work within for the next two years. Three important changes and clarifications came from ACWW's involvement, including the creation of new interaction and dialogue channels for the Committee to work on; and the call for a stronger network of NGOs working together in support of the Committee's agenda but independent of their direction. This was an important forum for ACWW to present our goals and policy, as part of our strategy of engagement on the global stage with decision makers and those able to promote our ideals at the highest levels.