

A Common Reference Framework for Safe and Inclusive Activities

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1. Introduction



As a European civil society network dedicated to values of non-discrimination, gender equality and social inclusion, COFACE and its representatives must practice its values within all operations and activities, both internally within the secretariat and the membership network, and externally when representing COFACE or working with partner organisations.

This Common Reference Framework (CRF), annexed to the COFACE Rules of Procedure, is intended to provide a structured set of principles, standards, guidelines, and processes that provide a shared understanding and consistent approach for achieving goals, solving problems, or managing activities across the organisation. It acts as a blueprint or foundation for how COFACE operates in all its activities and how it works with key external organisations.

The objective of the CRF is to ensure that:

- 1 Proper safeguards are in place to protect employees, members and anyone engaged with COFACE activities;
- 2 The spaces COFACE provides for participation are inclusive and safe;
- 3 Everyone who represents COFACE does so with professionalism and a commitment to its values;
- 4 COFACE is accountable as an organisation for providing this inclusive, professional and safe space and dealing with any complaints.

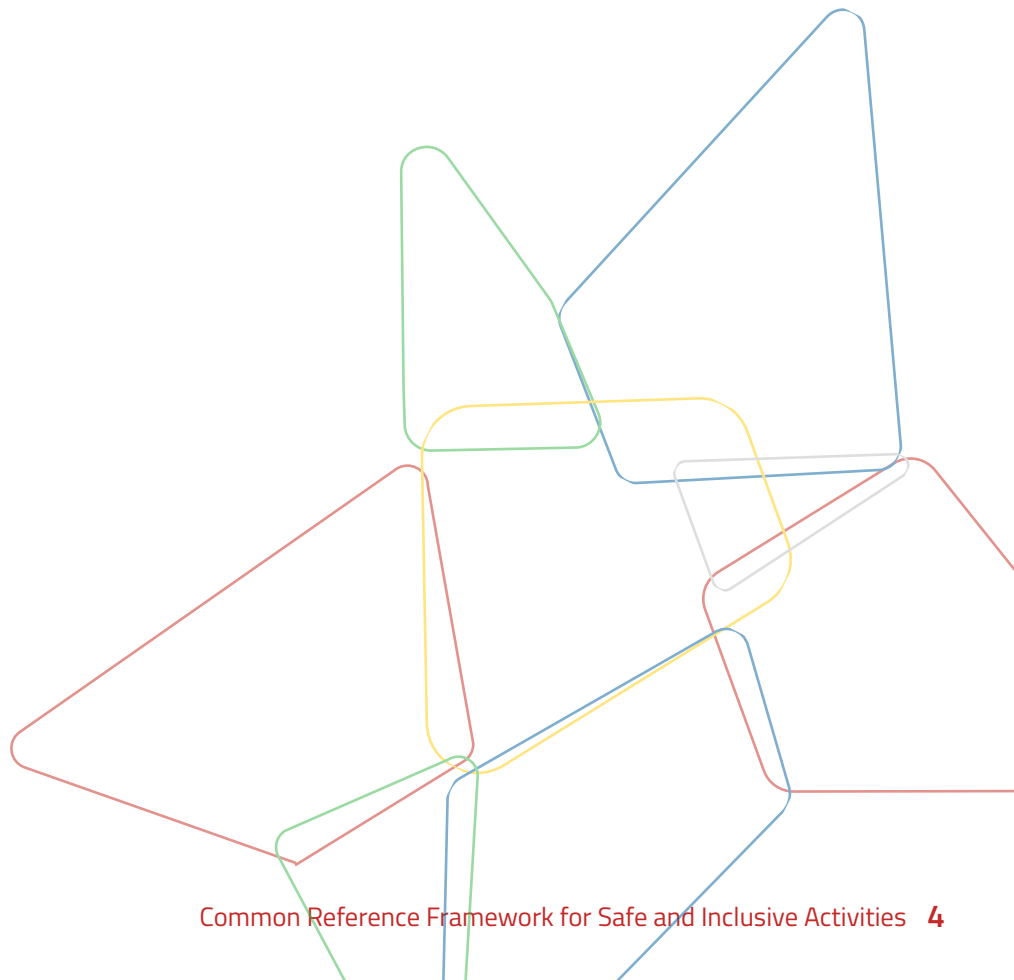
The reason for adopting and applying this CRF is to ensure that COFACE employees and representatives feel safer at work, know how to behave appropriately during meetings, with overarching positive impacts for both internal good governance and quality external representation in line with the COFACE mandate and values.

The CRF covers all individuals (employees, Executive Buro members, Administrative Council members), representatives from organisations in the COFACE membership, and any organisation or person who COFACE enters into an agreement or partnership with. This means it is applicable to all, and we must collectively be alert and act to ensure its full implementation.

All incoming members, representatives of members and employees of COFACE, as well as key partner organisations, will receive a copy of this CRF and must sign or agree to it before attending or undertaking any activities on behalf of COFACE. This can be

implemented during the registration phase of an event, online or offline, with the following text: "To keep our events safe and inclusive, COFACE has developed a Common Reference Framework which is available on the COFACE website. Please tick the box to indicate that you understand the need to respect its principles and guidelines when participating in a COFACE activity." Additionally, the CRF can be integrated in the welcome speeches of COFACE meetings, highlighting that it is applicable to all COFACE activities and that there is a complaints form available on the COFACE website should participants wish to draw attention to cases where the CRF is not being applied and which require action.

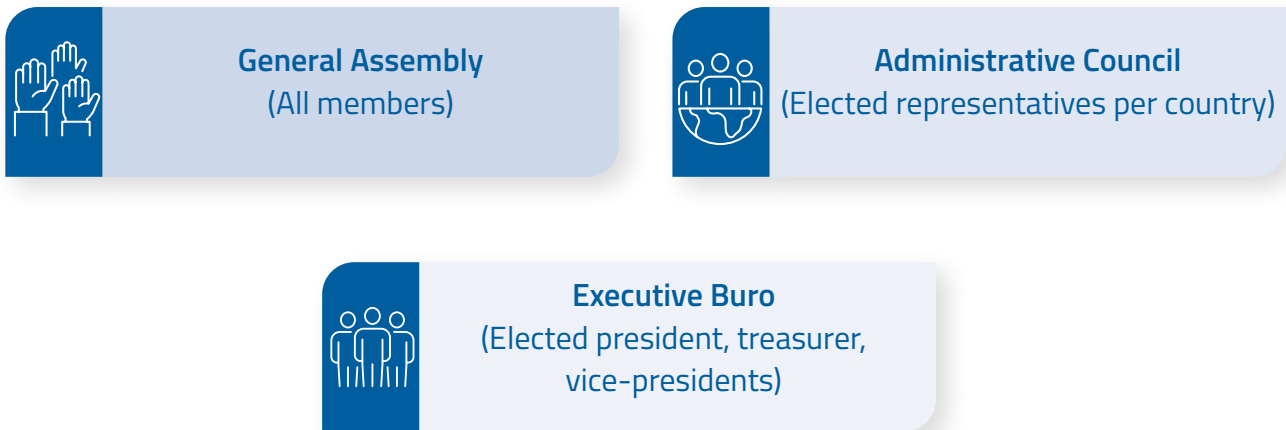
COFACE will facilitate conversations with employees and those with specific responsibilities under this CRF to ensure that everyone is aware that they should use it when they feel there has been inappropriate behaviour or actions, and to ensure people with responsibilities to respond to complaints know how to do so effectively.



2. Organisation Chart

COFACE's structure is organised in such a way as to guarantee real representativeness through its statutory bodies, working democratically with sound and transparent governance methods and actively involving all members.

DESIGN / DECISION



IMPLEMENTATION





The **General Assembly** is open to the representatives of all member organisations and lays down our general strategy every year.



The **Administrative Council** is COFACE's most important decision-making body which meets at least 3 times a year to discuss matters of strategic importance to families such as the impacts of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan.



The **Executive Buro** (President, two Vice-Presidents and Treasurer) prepares and carries out the Administrative Council's decisions in close collaboration with the Director and Secretariat in Brussels ensuring the operationalisation of the annual work plan.



The **COFACE Disability platform** and various **working group meetings** serve to build policy positions, practical tools for transnational exchange and mutual learning, organise capacity-building, and study different local realities of families and family support systems through visits to different member organisations.



The **European Family Lab** consists of different branches, including regular webinars for families and professionals, an annual meeting of ministries, the European Observatory on Family Policy (with a steering group), the L.I.N.K. education programme (with a steering group).



The **COFACE secretariat composed of paid staff in Brussels** is responsible for the day-to-day delivering of the key actions, in close cooperation with COFACE President and Executive Buro, including facilitating exchanges across countries through conferences and seminars, mapping and surveying needs and challenges for families and emerging trends in services/policies, building networks within the family policy sector and alliances with partners external to the sector, and carrying out capacity-building trainings on EU and family matters. This includes online interactions with the wider COFACE community across Europe and beyond.

3. General principles

COFACE staff, members and partners are committed to equality, solidarity, social inclusion, non-discrimination, and the respect of fundamental rights for all.

Member organisations which join COFACE, commit to respect the COFACE Statutes, to respect the pluralistic approach of COFACE, and its policy of non-discrimination and of equal opportunities between persons and between family forms. They also commit to respectful participation in all COFACE activities, being respectful towards its secretariat, member organisations, stakeholders, and funders.

As a workplace and safe and inclusive community, COFACE aims to foster mutual respect, well-being and dignity in all its relations in the workplace and with partners and individuals.

Representatives of COFACE, particularly COFACE staff and Executive Buro members, shall always act in the interest of COFACE and in accordance with its Statutes, Rules of Procedure and this CRF. Staff and representatives of COFACE must also adhere to Belgian or national laws that are applicable, if abroad, and applicable international conventions.

Inclusive meetings

All COFACE staff, members and partners must be committed to creating inclusive meeting spaces where diversity is valued and respected. This covers all COFACE activities offline and online, including statutory meetings, working groups, study visits and campaigns. We aim to create an inclusive atmosphere and an accessible environment in our meetings (offline and online), while enforcing non-violent communication and balanced, respectful and inclusive facilitation. All meeting participants are invited to engage actively with content prepared by the different speakers, and not create any distraction. Meeting chairs and facilitators will always try to ensure that meetings run on time. However, when meetings last longer than planned, it is expected that participants who need to leave do so respectfully of the people intervening or speaking and do not emit complaints.

COFACE requires that the behaviour of any individual participating in any offline or online activity must be in line with the values of this CRF.

COFACE takes a zero-tolerance approach in its activities to any kind of discrimination and violence including but not limited to bullying, degradation, harassment, verbal, non-verbal, physical or non-physical humiliation and intimidation.

Before every activity, the staff member or other representative who is responsible for the event, meeting or activity will ensure that participants will be made aware of this CRF and the complaints procedure (outlined below).

Facilitating equal participation

COFACE is committed to the participation of all people on equal terms and no representative of COFACE should seek to make participation more difficult for anyone and should seek to facilitate the participation of people in the vulnerable situations that we represent. This includes making meetings accessible and inclusive. Examples of this would be ensuring that people in vulnerable situations feel supported to contribute, safe, and that the space is shared equally with them. This also means proactively encouraging the participation of minorities in COFACE staff (through DEI recruitment policies), in COFACE governance structures and in COFACE activities.

Inclusive language is evolving. We recognise the power of language in changing community attitudes and the rights of all people to use language that is meaningful to them. We acknowledge that language is socially constructed and constantly evolving. We understand that one term or description may not capture the full breadth of individual identity or be the language that individuals or groups identify with. This is especially true in a multi-lingual network like COFACE. Our aim is to be inclusive and respectful of everyone and we commit to evolve our language as it changes to create an inclusive meeting place.

Aspects of a person's identity can include the following attributes: gender, disability, marital status, parental status or status as carer, physical features, pregnancy, race, religious belief, sex, sexual orientation, age, as well as health (physical or mental) status, migration status, socio-economic status, language. Identities within an individual may come, go or converge depending on time or place (for example life stages).

Intersectionality is linked to the fact that attitudes, systems and structures in society and organisations can interact to create inequality. Intersectionality refers to the ways in which multiple aspects of someone's identity can expose them to compounding, additional and unique forms of discrimination and exclusion. In COFACE we recognise that people with intersecting identities experience additional discrimination or exclusion, and try to be aware of this during meetings.

We support the right of people with disability to choose the language they use to refer to themselves. We acknowledge that persons with intellectual disabilities must feel included as anyone else, with clear presentations and language during meetings.

We support the right of people to use their preferred language to describe their sexual orientation, sex, intersex variation and gender. We acknowledge that LGBTIQ+ people and communities are diverse and the measures used to support and empower LGBTIQ+ staff, members and partners will also be diverse.

We support survivors of (child) sexual abuse and acknowledge that some meeting discussions may be triggering, and we commit to providing a safe meeting space for them and all participants.

When children are present at meetings, we commit to fully implementing the COFACE Child safeguarding policy and ensure that interactions with children are respectful and appropriate.

We do not engage in any racist language in COFACE meetings or activities, either directly or indirectly, and ensure a meeting culture that is respectful, inclusive and free from racial discrimination.

Safeguarding of adults and children

COFACE is committed to safeguarding employees and individuals who are involved in or benefit from COFACE activities. This includes addressing improper uses of power, ensuring security, dealing with any forms of harassment, bullying, discrimination and violence. Security in a work environment is essential for safety, health and well-being, as well as for sustainability. COFACE has security responsibilities for its employees and is responsible for discussing security aspects and measures with member organisations and partner organisations.

This is especially the case if COFACE staff, members and partners work with persons under the age of 18, or if they attend COFACE activities with their children. This requires parental consent and/or additional safeguarding procedures for the accompanying staff and representatives, and awareness of all participants when a child is present and what behaviour to adopt. This includes the sensitive handling of children's photos and videos such as taking the following actions: showing children in such a way that they cannot be recognised (for example, from the side, from behind, from above, far away or in the blurred area of the photo); showing children fully clothed; showing children in larger groups; showing children together with adults and in such a way that the latter are difficult to cut out.¹ COFACE is dedicated to protecting children from all forms of abuse, neglect, grooming and exploitation, guided by principles of zero tolerance for abuse, prioritisation of children's best interests, prevention of harm, and accountability.

Safety and risk awareness are also a responsibility of employees and representatives of COFACE. Security must be considered when planning events, meetings, accommodation and travel. Those covered by the CRF should do their utmost not to expose themselves or others to risk when travelling for work. It is important to be aware of, and avoid, risk behaviours that could lead to situations of conflict or reprisals by authorities, threats, violence, blackmail, or other dangers. Information shall be handled with care. This applies to all communications and information, especially digital. Carelessness could directly endanger colleagues, members and partners.

Employees and representatives of COFACE may also be subject to improper uses of power, security risk, forms of harassment, bullying, discrimination and violence at events or activities of COFACE partners. COFACE commits to raise any such behaviour with external partners and request specific action through relevant complaints procedures or dialogue with the partner.

In order to protect employees and representatives, decisions can also be taken to disengage with partners, if behaviours are not sufficiently addressed. COFACE representatives or employees can raise such behaviour directly with the Director, the staff and HR focal point in the Executive Buro. Anyone who raises such an issue should not be fearful of the impact on their employment and all issues raised will be dealt with in a serious and confidential manner. COFACE will encourage partners to develop their own safeguarding and reporting procedures to encourage a safe environment for all.

¹ Save The Children Germany (2025) On the Sensitive Handling of Children's Photos and Videos in Institutions and Organisations

No discrimination, harassment and violence

COFACE opposes all forms of harassment, violence, bullying, discrimination, or any similar harmful behaviours and has a zero-tolerance policy for such behaviours. This also includes personalised critical remarks about staff or other meeting participants or members in meetings of COFACE.

Feedback on staff can be made privately to the Director. At all times in COFACE spaces, we communicate honestly and respectfully. No single person or group, regardless of gender, gender identity, gender expression, age, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, social status, political opinion, or functional variation may be discriminated against.

In the COFACE Work Regulations, employees and members of the Executive Buro are bound by the policy on prevention of psychosocial load caused by work, as well as violence, harassment and sexual harassment at work.

Harassment can be external or internal to the activities of COFACE. It can occur over a certain period of time and can have the aim or the effect of harming the personality, dignity or physical or psychological integrity of a person attending COFACE activities or an employee whilst carrying out their work so as to pose a threat to their work or to create an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment. It can manifest itself through words, intimidation and unilateral acts, gestures and written materials.

Freedom from sexual harassment, abuse, sexual exploitation

No individual shall in any way be subjected to sexual harassment, whether in physical or mental form. It can involve touching, groping, jokes, suggestions, glances, and images that are sexually evocative and devaluing. Sexual harassment can take the form of verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that is designed to harm the dignity of a person or to create an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment. It is the victim who decides whether the behaviour is unwelcome.

All forms of sexual abuse and exploitation are prohibited, as are all forms of sexual contact between adults and children. It is unacceptable to exploit a person or group in a situation of vulnerability. Purchase of sexual services and use of pornographic material during work hours or when travelling to represent the organisation, all transactions, money, employment, goods, or services, in exchange for sexual acts or other forms of degrading behaviour and exploitation are prohibited. These activities are strictly prohibited where deemed illegal also during leisure time. The purchase of sexual services does not only refer to the purchase of sexual services in the traditional sense, it also includes "private assistance" meaning payment of bills, rents, clothing, school fees, and so on in exchange for sexual services.

Visits to brothels, porn or strip clubs and similar establishments must be avoided and is prohibited when travelling to represent COFACE. Furthermore, pornographic material must not be consumed using the technical equipment provided by COFACE.

Integrity and preventing conflict of interest

Conflicts of interest may arise within the operation of COFACE. When decisions are taken that are not in the best interest of the organisation or its operations, a conflict of interest might be the reason. The existence of family ties, friendships, or financial relationships between persons linked to COFACE activities may affect the perception of COFACE's credibility, impartiality, and independence.

Conflicts of interest can arise from financial, political or other strategic interests of individuals representing COFACE and may negatively impact the organisation's strategy, the management of financial resources, contracting, procurement, travel, and participation in activities. Everyone covered by the CRF should report possible conflicts of interest to the COFACE Director or Executive Buro members.

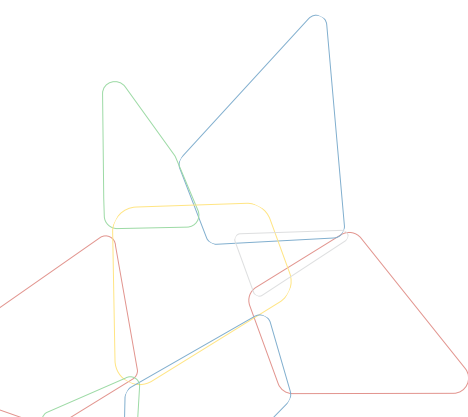
Staff members are invited to inform the Director of their intention to have a complementary professional activity to their COFACE work, and seek to avoid placing themselves or being placed in a situation of conflict of interest. A conflict of interest refers to a situation where they may not be able to take impartial and objective decisions for the implementation of their job description. Personal interests are legitimate, but must be reconcilable with the impartial implementation of the job tasks. (see COFACE Work Regulations for Staff and Conflicts of Interest).

If there is a conflict of interest, the matter will be discussed with the person concerned, for a first assessment. Following the first assessment, the situation may be resolved. If not resolved, the matter will be taken to the COFACE Executive Buro for discussion and decision. The person who may be in a situation of conflict of interest has the right to request a legal assessment of the situation by an independent legal expert, before any disciplinary action may be taken.

No improper use of power

COFACE recognises that power can be held by the organisation and its representatives and is committed to addressing power imbalances. A position of power must never be used improperly for someone's own benefit or at the expense of others. An economic, or other close relationship (i.e. romantic or friendship) with a person who is, or may be perceived to be, dependent or junior or child or in a less privileged position is inappropriate and shall be avoided. Such a relationship could risk exposing both parties to negative consequences, both in the current relationship and in the future.

Should such a relationship arise, the Director or HR focal point of the Executive Buro shall be informed as soon as possible. In addition, a position of power must not be used to give anyone advantages they would not normally have enjoyed. Conduct and relations shall be carried out in such a way that there can never be a perception that different benefits are expected or required.



Quality information and data management

Information and data management are essential tools for COFACE. Adherence to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is key to be able to guarantee the integrity of COFACE employees, members, and partners. The dissemination of information through various channels across Europe and beyond is a central part of COFACE communications and work.

COFACE strives to be open and transparent regarding all operations and financing. This means proactively sharing timely, accessible, relevant, and clear information about the organisation and its activities, as well as answering requests for information.

There are times when it is inappropriate to disclose information. Disclosure of sensitive information, including personal information related to human resources, risks seriously compromising the security of employees, members and partners, compromising COFACE's effectiveness, and reducing the organisation's credibility. Discretion is therefore expected, and sensitive information must not be disseminated, in line with COFACE's Privacy Policy. Information that has not been made public and that is known to individuals in COFACE because of their position may not be used for private benefit. It is understood that this does not affect the exchange of information among colleagues that is necessary for COFACE operations.

Preventing substance misuse

Carrying out activities on behalf of COFACE while under the influence of alcohol could risk the reputation of the organisation and lead to an erosion of trust and respect from colleagues and partners. Therefore, a restrictive approach to alcohol shall be observed. Alcohol consumption is only permitted in exceptional cases, such as at public dinners, occasionally during team buildings and similar events. On these occasions, it is important that alcohol consumption is moderate. Alcohol consumption is strictly forbidden when travelling by car and, as a passenger, individuals should always react if they suspect that the driver is under the influence of alcohol.

All forms of involvement with and consumption of substances classified as illegal narcotics are prohibited both during working hours and leisure time. Exceptions are made if the substances relate to prescription medicine for personal use. Any struggles with alcohol or substance abuse issues will be dealt with in a spirit of support and caring.

4. Complaints mechanism for common reference framework

For complaints about COFACE activities, an online form is available on the COFACE website.

Complaints about discrimination and harassment

In case of work stress, verbal, moral, physical, or sexual harassment, and other, by a COFACE staff member, COFACE Administrator, COFACE member or COFACE partner, you may turn to:

- the Director in confidence;
- to the appointed COFACE Human Resources focal point in confidence (currently Antonia Torrens, COFACE President);
- to any member of the COFACE Administrative Council in confidence.

If a staff member, representative from a member organisation or partner organisation considers to have been victim of a form of harassment, the first step to resolve the matter will be to organise separate discussions with each individual concerned to fully understand the issues at stake. If this concerns members of staff, a member or a partner, the Director will conduct the assessment. If this concerns the Director, the appointed HR focal point from the COFACE Executive Buro will conduct the assessment. Following this first individual assessment, both people concerned will be brought together for a joint discussion. If not resolved within 2 weeks, the matter will be taken to the COFACE Executive Buro for discussion and decision. The person conducting the assessment shall record all proceedings in writing and a copy of these shall be given to all parties involved.

In case you are witness to harassment during a COFACE activity, you are invited to do either of the following:

- Connect with the victim to talk about their situation;
- Connect with the HR person from the COFACE Executive Buro in all confidence.

Complaints about participants in COFACE activities, events or meetings

In the case of witnessing or receiving a report of any written, non-verbal or verbal violent or discriminatory behaviour, conduct or discourse during a COFACE activity, the staff member or other representative responsible for the meeting may respond, using their best judgment and depending on severity of the action, with the following actions:

1. Remind participants of their obligation to act in accordance with the CRF;
2. Have a one-to-one conversation with the person to make sure that there is an understanding of the inappropriate action;
3. Engage with the person to explain and ask for an apology and/or retraction;
4. Suspend the session and/or ask the person to leave the meeting, event or activity. If the person refuses to leave, they can be ejected from the meeting online or escorted out;
5. In the case of violent or discriminatory behaviour, conduct or discourse that is physical in nature, immediately suspend the activity, ensure that the venue is safe for all participants and all concerned parties are in discrete locations and, if necessary, contact the police according to the laws of the country.

If the complaint is received after the event, the Director will review the complaint with the relevant staff member, and have conversations with those affected and the person about whom the complaint was made. If the CRF has not been respected, depending on the severity, actions can include:

1. Informing the persons involved that their behaviour does not respect the CRF, and the importance of upholding the principles of the CRF in order to participate in an activity of COFACE in the future;
2. Ask the person to apologise to the person or group who made the complaint;
3. Temporarily ban the person from attending meetings or activities.

In cases where mediation is necessary between the parties, the Director will endeavour to provide mediation on a good faith basis and in line with the principles of this CRF. The complainant may request an apology or other remedy mentioned above, if that step has not already been taken. Complainants should be informed of steps taken, in line with any confidentiality considerations.

Complaints about representatives of COFACE

Any complaints shall be submitted to the COFACE Director, or to the COFACE Executive Buro if the complaint is about the Director. In both cases, the complaint must be addressed. Given that information in the complaints may be sensitive, information shall always be handled with care, both by the person providing the information and by the person receiving it. An active and open dialogue is essential.

As well as addressing the complaint itself, follow-up measures will be taken to ensure inappropriate actions are not repeated. This can involve actions such as amendment of the CRF, a collective training, disciplinary sanctions, the most extreme effect of which is dismissal or the end to a contract.

Employees subject of the complaint shall be informed in writing and be given ten days to respond before any disciplinary action is taken. National legislation shall be complied with, and if the complaint refers to action of a criminal nature, the person concerned may also be reported to the police in Belgium or elsewhere.

5. Review of the common reference framework

The content of this CRF is to be reviewed every two years by the COFACE Executive Buro. The Director is responsible for ensuring that the CRF and related documents are known and complied with in the organisation.



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