

**ADDRESS BY MARY ROBINSON,
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FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
TO THE INTERNATIONAL CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE OF
NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS FOR THE PROMOTION AND
PROTECTION
OF HUMAN RIGHTS**



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Distinguished members of the International Co-ordinating Committee, ladies and gentlemen, it is a pleasure to see so many familiar faces and to have an opportunity to address you once again.

As you are aware, I follow closely and support your work. My Special Advisor, Brian Burdekin, and his modest National Institutions Team are in regular contact with you.

Over the past four years many of you have heard me reaffirm my commitment to the establishment and strengthening of effective, independent, pluralist and accessible national institutions which are in conformity with the internationally accepted standards - the Paris Principles. You are also aware that I have continued to insist that these standards be respected both in my direct contacts with national institutions and with your respective Governments. I believe they are key to embedding a true culture of human rights in societies. I look to you, the Chair and members of the International Co-ordinating Committee, both to represent and to re-affirm these standards.

As you know, the support of my Office is contingent on a demonstrated willingness to meet internationally accepted standards and a genuine commitment to produce results. In the case of institutions which are subservient to Governments that violate their international human rights obligations, support has not been forthcoming – nor will it be.

The challenges facing national institutions are many, as they are for those whom you seek to serve. In this context, I have previously encouraged you to focus on several specific issues. Last year one particular area was HIV/AIDS and the effects this pandemic is having on every society. The link between human rights and HIV/AIDS is undeniable. The spread and impact of HIV is fuelled when human rights are not respected. The promotion and protection of human rights is vital to reducing vulnerability to HIV infection, lessening the adverse impact of HIV/AIDS on those affected, and empowering individuals and communities to respond effectively to the pandemic. I was encouraged to hear of the important discussions the African National Institutions had during their recent 3rd Regional Meeting on the role of national institutions in combating HIV/AIDS. In this regard, I would like to highlight the International Guidelines on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights, which synthesize HIV-related human rights norms and incorporate a series of practical measures to be taken by States, national institutions, NGOs, and the UN system. I will have the pleasure shortly of giving the floor to Dr. Peter Piot, Executive Director of UNAIDS. I hope you will take the opportunity this week to work with our colleagues in OHCHR and UNAIDS dealing with this area so that together we may address much more effectively this global scourge.

Yesterday, many of you took part in a consultation on human rights and disabilities. I believe you have unique opportunities to be proactive and, to develop programmes at national level which will ensure that the international human rights norms and standards are an effective and accessible resource for people with disabilities.

I have strongly supported the establishment of regional mechanisms, including those relating to national institutions. The Asia Pacific Forum has been a particularly important partner for our Office and I have been pleased to support its rapid development as an active member of the human rights community. The role the Forum plays in assisting National Institutions to comply with the Paris Principles is particularly valuable.

It is encouraging that similar regional fora are in the process of being established in both Latin America and Africa. My Office will continue to support their development to the extent of our limited resources. I would also encourage the European network to ensure that Member States within this region acknowledge that national institutions are a valuable resource, not only for developing countries but also for those which are considered “developed”. On a personal note, I am particularly pleased to have the Chairman of the recently established Irish Human Rights Commission with us today.

THE WORLD CONFERENCE:

In my capacity as Secretary-General of the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance I strongly encourage you to take an active part in preparations for the Durban Conference and in the Conference itself. Last year I asked you to organise national activities which would help generate momentum for the Conference. I know some of you have already done so, and others are at an advanced stage of planning; but we can, and must, do much more.

Racism and intolerance are still common all over the world. If we are to make the 21st century a true era of human rights, we must come to terms with humanity’s long and tragic history of racism. The preparatory process for the World Conference has provided opportunities for experts, NGOs, national institutions, civil society and governments to bring to the fore a wide range of issues and to highlight the multiple forms of intolerance which still persist and new ways of communicating hate messages.

This cannot be a World Conference of words only. It must be one of action and practical results. National institutions are well placed to provide the impetus for such action. Many national institutions have

played an active part in the regional preparatory meetings for the World Conference. National institutions will have the right to address the World Conference, giving a voice to those who often go unheard.

I am glad that you have set aside time this week to be briefed in more detail about the Durban Conference by the World Conference Secretariat. I am convinced your institutions can and must be active players in the efforts towards achieving positive results and in ensuring that the Conference is effectively followed up.

I know that some of you are concerned about the role you play as national institutions on the international stage, including in the Commission on Human Rights. I fully agree that independent, effective national institutions have an important role to play. Last year you were, for the first time, accorded appropriate accreditation at the Commission. This year many of your statements will be distributed following established procedures; next year we hope to have further advances. These steps may seem modest but they are steps in the right direction.

The International Co-ordinating Committee must play its part too – by ensuring that the national institutions that you recognise are in genuine compliance with the Paris Principles. Failure to meet this challenge could jeopardize the still emerging recognition of your right to participate here.

During my opening statement to the 57th Session of the Commission I reviewed the strengths and weaknesses of my Office. One area on which I placed great emphasis is the need for effective resourcing. Resourcing provides the capacity for us to assist you in carrying out your work, as well as the stability which will allow the Office to continue to mature into a professional and effective organisation capable of giving leadership in meeting the challenges of the 21st century.

Technical co-operation is one important aspect of the work of my Office which is relevant to National Institutions. Within existing resources constraints, we stand ready to assist those institutions and states which demonstrate a clear commitment to the international standards.

There are also other important areas in which we would like to encourage you to be active. For example, my colleagues held a meeting a few weeks ago to discuss inter-agency co-operation in relation to the human rights treaty monitoring system and the important role which NGOs and national institutions can play. I invite you to pursue an active role in this international monitoring process, by raising public awareness of the human rights instruments, lobbying for their implementation, and actively monitoring this implementation at the national level. At the same time, I encourage you to contribute to each of the

Committees' pre-sessional working groups, at which stage critical issues may be raised. I also encourage you to contribute to and complement governments' reports to the treaty bodies, as you can often reflect more fully the reality of human rights in your countries. Finally, you have a major role to play in ensuring that the various Committees' recommendations are effectively followed up.

Another important challenge I hope you will address is increasing cooperation with the Special Procedures of the Commission on Human Rights, including both thematic and country mechanisms, such as the Special Representatives and Rapporteurs.

When I first addressed your Committee in 1998 you were relatively few in number. Since then I have seen the numbers grow and the involvement of national institutions increase in all areas of human rights work. I gave a strong signal then of recognition of the importance of your work and the assurance that my personal commitment would be reflected in the priorities of my Office.

I believe I can say that my Office has made headway in meeting that commitment and assure you that we will continue to do so. I wish you success in your discussions over the next few days and very much look forward to your substantial contributions to the Durban World Conference against Racism.

Thank you Mr. Chairman