

Ms Mary Robinson, High Commissioner for Human Rights

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I am very pleased to have been invited to address this prestigious gathering on the topic of Business and Human Rights.

Some of you may be asking yourselves: what do these two have in common?

The aim of business is readily understood. It is to get the best possible return for investors and shareholders.

But what is the relationship between human rights and business?

I would guess that there are still misapprehensions in the business community about human rights. I think some people would regard them as, at best, irrelevant as far as the business community is concerned or, at worst, as something which could interfere with business goals.

The main theme of my remarks today is that human rights are the concern of business men and women, whether working in small businesses or for large corporations.

The good news is that more and more business leaders are coming to accept this. A few years ago it would have been difficult to imagine a conference of business leaders giving attention to human rights. Today, more and more business leaders and their companies are incorporating human rights into their business strategies.

They know that there can be clear benefits for businesses which play an active role in respecting human rights.

Firstly, I should explain a little about the Office I hold, that of High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The Office has only been in existence for 5 years and is the most recently created position at Under Secretary General level in the United Nations system. The creation of the post of High Commissioner for Human Rights arose from a growing appreciation of the central role that human rights play in international affairs. I took on this responsibility in September, 1997.

We are very familiar with one set of human rights, described as civil and political rights. Unfortunately these are probably the best known rights because abuses are so blatant. An example is Kosovo. I spent eleven days last month in the former Yugoslavia and its neighboring countries and heard many terrible reports from refugees from the conflict. Indeed, for most of the decade, the Balkans have been the scene of some of the most brutal violations of human rights in memory.

Of course, Yugoslavia is not the only example. Genocide has taken place again in the past decades in Rwanda and Cambodia. There are many serious conflicts occurring and human rights violations being committed, even as we meet, in different parts of the globe.

Every day my Office receives hundreds of appeals from victims of serious violations around the world. These include appeals relating to executions, torture, disappearances, violence against women, racial discrimination, detention without trial. We respond as best we can to these cases, both by monitoring Governments' performances in the field of human rights and, increasingly, by preventive measures such as supporting the establishment of effective national human rights institutions and promoting regional cooperation.

One of the big changes over the past fifty years is that human rights legislation is now extensive and firmly established, starting with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was adopted 50 years ago, and on through more than 60 different international agreements. Few Governments would try to argue today that human rights are a purely internal affair.

The principal problem we face is the gap between theory and practice. Governments now feel it incumbent on them to sign up to international human rights treaties but many continue to flaunt their provisions. The hope is that, as monitoring and enforcement mechanisms improve, there will be a strong deterrent to Governments and individuals contemplating carrying out human rights abuses and a clear message that they will be answerable if they do.

I turn now to the second set of human rights, known as economic, social and cultural rights. Like civil and political rights, these are enshrined in the basic human rights document, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They include the right to work, the right to equal pay for equal work, the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to education, to food, clothing, housing and medical care. Violations of these rights take the form of hunger, poverty, exclusion, discrimination, lack of access to health care, education, and clean water.

We can see how far away we are from realizing these rights if we look at some statistics regarding the plight of children. UNICEF reported at the last session of the Commission on Human Rights that every year some 12 million children under the age of five die from preventable diseases. In poor societies, children are the most desperately vulnerable with some 250 million children working at a brutally young age, while 130 million children - mostly girls - are not receiving education.

One of the objectives I have set myself since I took on this office is to place greater emphasis on economic, social and cultural rights which have tended to be neglected in the past. The abuse of social and economic rights can have as bad an effect on countries and peoples as assaults on civil and political rights. In some respects, the damage can be even more long lasting. We cannot expect civil and political rights to thrive if people have no access to the basic necessities of life. The two sets of rights are complimentary. They should both be vigorously championed and defended.

Notwithstanding the fact that our knowledge of what is happening in every part of the world has been greatly increased by the information revolution, the record is the same for economic, social and cultural rights as it is for civil and political rights: there is a huge difference between what the international community says and what it does. The gap between rich and poor both within and between societies grows ever larger. The World Bank estimates that the number of people living on a dollar a day will reach 1.5 billion this year. One third of the population of sub-Saharan Africa will not live past the age of forty. In Southern Asia half of all children under five are malnourished while two thirds of women cannot read or write.