

WHAT ARE NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS INSTITUTIONS?

National human rights institutions are independent bodies established to stand up for those in need of protection and to hold governments to account for their human rights obligations. They also help shape laws, policies and attitudes that create stronger, fairer societies.

NHRIs are established by law or in the constitution, to promote and protect human rights in their respective countries. However, they operate and function independently from government in fulfilling their mandates.

The "Paris Principles" ("Principles Relating to the Status and Functioning of National Institutions") were adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1991 as the basic standards for NHRIs, requiring each have:

- A broad mandate based on universal human rights standards
- Autonomy from other State entities
- Independence guaranteed by statute or constitution, but also by adequate and stable funding and staffing
- Pluralism including through membership and/or effective cooperation
- Adequate powers of investigation.

Strong and effective NHRIs help bridge the "protection gap" between the rights of individuals and the responsibilities of the State by:

- Monitoring the human rights situation in the country and the actions of the State
- Providing advice to the State so that it can meet its international and domestic human rights commitments
- Receiving, investigating and resolving complaints of human rights violations
- Undertaking human rights education programs for all sections of the community
- Engaging with the international human rights community to raise pressing issues and advocate for recommendations that can be made to the State.

NHRIs help drive changes – big and small – that make a lasting difference in the lives of individuals and that can strengthen the fabric of our communities. Change can take many forms: such as removing discrimination in laws and policies, improving the practices of law enforcement and government officials, promoting better ways of doing business, and challenging negative stereotypes about vulnerable groups in the community.

NHRIs are funded by their respective states and, unlike civil society organisations and other non-governmental organisations, are considered a formal part of their state apparatus.

Although the Paris Principles outline basic standards for NHRIs, they do not require NHRIs adopt a specific model in fulfilling their mandate. As such, the form each NHRI takes will vary depending on the context of the state they operate within. The most common models of NHRIs adopted are:

- **National Human Rights Commissions:** these NHRIs are state-sponsored bodies consisting of multiple members acting as decision-makers. They have an explicit human rights mandate, however some may focus on a specific area – for example, women's human rights. Typically, National Human Rights Commissions are empowered to investigate human rights violations and serve broader advisory and educational roles.
- **Human Rights Ombudsman Institutions:** also known as Public Defenders, these NHRIs are usually led by a single decision-maker. Unlike traditional ombudsman, which focus exclusively on maladministration, human rights ombudsman institutions have a state-sponsored mandate to protect and promote human rights.
- **Hybrid institutions:** sharing many features with human rights ombudsman institutions, these NHRIs are state-sponsored and operate with multiple mandates. They are usually led by a single decision-maker and aim to protect and promote human rights but may also broadly address other issues related to maladministration, corruptions and the environment.
- **Consultative and advisory bodies:** state-sponsored with a mandate to protect and promote human rights, these NHRIs advise or consult on a wide range of human rights issues, and may undertake human rights research. Because they are usually driven by multiple social forces, these bodies tend to have a large number of decision-makers from different fields
- **Institutes and centres:** like consultative and advisory bodies, these NHRIs typically have large membership. However, these bodies have much broader membership from all levels of society and decision-making is usually left to select staff members. Centres usually undertake research in human rights issues.