

The Paris Principles after 20 years

05.12.2013

Twenty years ago this month, on 20 December 1993, the United Nations General Assembly endorsed the *Principles relating to the status and functioning of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights* (the Paris Principles).^[1] These principles provided a set of international minimum standards for national human rights institutions (NHRIs). They are the basis on which NHRIs are established and develop and are given international recognition for their independence.



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The first NHRIs had emerged during the late 1970s and early 1980s. They were a new kind of mechanism for human rights promotion and protection – like courts in some respects but with greater scope, broader functions and far more flexibility in operations. They occupy space within the State structure among the three primary institutions of government, parliament and judiciary. They lie between the State and civil society, State institutions but independent of government.

Up till 1991 there had been little interaction among the small number of NHRIs and little exchange and collaboration. There were fewer than 20 NHRIs in 1991 and they had never met together to discuss their work and to promote their development. That changed totally and quickly. In September 2001, in Paris, the then UN Centre for Human Rights, the forebear of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, brought them together for their first meeting. The Centre for Human Rights set the agenda for the meeting but the NHRIs had their own ideas. They saw the need for international standards for NHRIs and so used the occasion to develop and adopt the Paris Principles, which were subsequently endorsed by the Commission on Human Rights and the General Assembly. The Paris Principles provide a benchmark, a set of minimum requirements, for NHRIs. Although endorsed by the General Assembly, they were not an official UN initiative but an initiative of the NHRIs themselves.

The Paris Principles are not lengthy – only about 1200 words. They are quite general overall, though some parts are very specific. They deal with basic issues for NHRIs, including

- competence and responsibilities
- composition
- independence
- methods of operation
- quasi-judicial (complaint handling) functions.

The adoption of the Paris Principles was very timely. They came on the scene soon after the Second World Conference on Human Rights gave strong endorsement of NHRIs and of the Paris Principles themselves.

The World Conference on Human Rights reaffirms the important and constructive role played by national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights, in particular in their advisory capacity to the competent authorities, their role in remedying human rights violations, in the dissemination of human rights information, and education in human rights.

The World Conference on Human Rights encourages the establishment and strengthening of national institutions, having regard to the 'Principles relating to the status of national institutions' and recognizing that it is the right of each State to choose the framework which is best suited to its particular needs at the national level.^[2]

Since 1995 the establishment and strengthening of NHRIs in compliance with the Paris Principles have been central concerns of the UN system and of States in encouraging effective national implementation of international human rights standards. The Human Rights Council regularly passes resolutions,^[3] as does the General Assembly.^[4] Treaty Monitoring Bodies (TMBs) have added their voices, often including recommendations for establishing or strengthening NHRIs in their Concluding Observations.^[5] The United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights (HCHR) has responded to the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (VDPA) and to the resolutions of UN bodies by supporting the establishment and strengthening of NHRIs.

And today the Paris Principles are the basis for the engagement of NHRIs in the international human rights system. NHRIs, through their International Coordinating Committee, undertake a peer review of new NHRIs and periodic reviews of existing NHRIs to assess their compliance with the Paris Principles. Those found to be fully compliant ('A' status NHRIs) have strong rights of participation in international human rights forums, including the Human Rights Council, with the Special Procedures and the Universal Periodic Review, and the treaty monitoring bodies.

So 22 years after their adoption by NHRIs and 20 years after their endorsement by the General Assembly, the Paris Principles are as relevant and as important today as they have ever been.

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^[1] *Principles relating to the status and functioning of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights* in Commission on Human Rights Resolution 1992/54 and General Assembly Resolution 48/134.

^[2] Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action part 1 para 36.

^[3] The most recent is Human Rights Council Resolution 20/14, adopted on 5 July 2012.

^[4] The most recent is General Assembly Resolution 66/169, adopted on 19 December 2011.

^[5] The International Coordinating Committee has prepared a compilation of treaty monitoring committee recommendations concerning national institutions, arranged by treaty committee and region, accessible [here](#).