



AN COIMISIÚN UM CHEARTA DUINE
IRISH HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

**ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS
MAKING STATES ACCOUNTABLE**

**IHRC & LAW SOCIETY
ANNUAL HUMAN RIGHTS CONFERENCE, 21 NOVEMBER 2009**

WELCOME ADDRESS

**DR. MAURICE MANNING, PRESIDENT,
IRISH HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION**

(Allotted time: 10 minutes; word count: 981)

1. INTRODUCTION

High Commissioner, Chief Justice, distinguished guests, friends and colleagues I would like to welcome you all to the seventh annual Human Rights Conference co-hosted by the Irish Human Rights Commission (IHRC) and the Law Society of Ireland.

We are particularly honoured this year to welcome the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms Navanethem Pillay, as our keynote speaker. The Office of the High Commissioner is a vital partner for National Human Rights Institutions, such as the IHRC, and has been an invaluable source of support for the Irish Commission in recent times.

I am also delighted to welcome the Honourable Justice John Murray, Chief Justice of Ireland who will set much of the context for today's discussion with his opening remarks on what is an extremely relevant issue for people throughout Ireland and indeed, throughout the world at the present time, namely the protection of

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economic, social and cultural rights. It is an area which needs far greater clarity and certainly than has been the case up to now and I look forward to what the Chief Justice will say.

2. AIM OF THE CONFERENCE

The aim of today's Conference is to examine the international and national protection of economic, social and cultural rights. Specifically, in the course of today, the range of eminent speakers who will provide their insights will examine the international and national human rights mechanisms in place to enforce the protection of these rights. The plenary sessions will offer an overview, while the parallel sessions will provide an opportunity to examine in more depth the extent to which these mechanisms hold the State to account and how they can be further strengthened.

3. SITUATION IN IRELAND – DOWNTURN

As we are all very keenly aware, the subject of today's conference is particularly timely in light of the economic crisis which is having a negative impact on access to economic, social and cultural rights generally, in particular in the areas of employment, social welfare assistance, education, health and housing. Indeed, this is a particularly pivotal time for Ireland as we await the announcement of the budget at the beginning of December.

It is without doubt that the Government faces some extremely stark choices in seeking to address the large and increasing deficit in public finances, in what is being described as the most significant budget of Ireland's recent economic history.

The choices that will be made by the Government now will continue to have an impact into the future and particularly for vulnerable groups in Irish society. I want therefore to call on government today to make best efforts to protect the economic, social and cultural rights of vulnerable members of Irish society in a

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targeted and strategic way as it goes about dealing with the financial crisis we are now facing.

Salvaging the economy is a vital and, no doubt, extremely challenging task, but an exclusive focus on economics will create a vacuum for the promotion of social justice and the protection of diverse and vulnerable groups. For Ireland to meet its international human rights obligations relating to economic, social and cultural rights, it is imperative that cuts in public spending do not adversely impact on groups at risk of poverty and do not lead to further social exclusion.

At the international level the UN High Commissioner has been active in debates relating to the economic recession urging States to ensure that cuts in fiscal spending are not taken at the expense of the poor through cutbacks in basic services and social protection mechanisms. She has shown real leadership in this area. This view is echoed by Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Thomas Hammarberg, who has called for a rights-based approach to budget analysis in response to the financial crisis.

The Irish State cannot afford to ignore human rights standards if it is to emerge from the economic crisis without increased inequality, social exclusion and deprivation.

4. SITUATION IN IRELAND – RELEVANT RIGHTS

Finally, I would just say a few words on Ireland's international human rights obligations in this area. At the UN level, Ireland has ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) which protects a broad range of economic and social rights. Ireland is due to submit its Third Periodic Report under this Convention shortly, and the IHRC will be active in its engagement with the treaty monitoring system to ensure that all relevant information is available to the ICESCR treaty body.

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One particularly important recent development for the protection of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is the Optional Protocol to the ICESCR, which opened for signature in September 2009. The Protocol is recognised as closing a historic gap in human rights protection in the international system by providing a complaints procedure for economic, social and cultural rights. The Irish Government has not yet signed or ratified this Optional Protocol and I take this opportunity to once again reiterate our recommendation that the Irish Government sign and ratify the Protocol without delay.

5. CONCLUSION

Protection of economic, social and cultural rights is increasingly important, particularly in difficult economic times, where lack of sufficient resources can have a serious impact on rights such as the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to adequate housing, the right to health and the right to education. The IHRC will continue through its work to actively promote and protect these rights. It is vital that national human rights institutions such as the IHRC are fully enhanced and resourced in this important work. I look forward to hearing from all of the distinguished speakers who have kindly agreed to lead us in our discussions today.