The Human Rights Council (HRC) must continue to forge stronger partnerships with national human rights institutions (NHRIs) as they have a crucial role in raising international awareness about human rights violations, holding States accountable for their commitments and for effectively implementing international human rights standards, says Mr Joachim Rücker, President of the Human Rights Council.

Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights over 60 years ago, we have witnessed significant advancements in the promotion and protection of human rights at the national, regional and international levels. This global shift generated a call for the creation of institutions to help States implement their commitments and aspirations in the area of human rights. One result that evolved was a new and unique type of institution: national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights, or in short, NHRIs.

As President of the Human Rights Council, I attach great importance to and recognize the crucial role of national human rights institutions that comply with the Paris Principles in promoting and monitoring the effective implementation of international human rights standards at the national level, a role which is increasingly recognized by the international community.

For the Human Rights Council, national human rights institutions play a unique role and their engagement is of great relevance to the Council’s work. Already in 1946, the -at the time- still nascent Commission on Human Rights had placed the support for national institutions as one of its priorities and recognized them as key actors. Throughout its time, NHRIs worked in close cooperation with the Commission based on the practices and arrangements, which were subsequently inherited and bolstered by the Human Rights Council.

NHRI participation: an international legal requirement

The Human Rights Council as well as the General Assembly have reaffirmed this important role played by NHRIs in numerous resolutions, all adopted by consensus with broad co-sponsorship by States from all regions. Among them, General Assembly resolution 48/134, adopted in 1993, plays a pivotal role by stipulating the diverse criteria and requirements for the establishment and functioning of NHRIs. More specifically, it lays out the principles relating to the Status of National Institutions – the so-called Paris Principles. Furthermore, reports of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly and to the Human Rights Council have highlighted the relevance and importance of NHRIs to the work of the HRC and the human rights pillar as a whole.

More importantly, however, the Council’s close cooperation with A-status NHRIs is enshrined in our very foundation: GA resolution 60/251 and HRC resolution 5/1. National institutions who adhere to the standards of independence, pluralism, accountability and impartiality and who fulfil the criteria set forth in the Paris Principles are granted participation rights in the Council, in particular with Special Procedures and in the Universal Periodic Review, as well as- going beyond the Council - with the Human Rights Treaty Bodies. This allows NHRIs who are found by the International Coordinating Committee of National Institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights (ICC) to be fully compliant with the Paris Principles (‘A’ status NHRIs) to directly interact with UN-system at the international level in the sphere of human rights.
NHRIs' specific contribution to human rights protection

Why are NHRIs so precious to the Human Rights Council? Overall, for the Council both State and non-State actors have an important role to play in the promotion and protection of human rights. But National Human Rights Institutions fall -strictly speaking- in neither of these two categories. They are unique in that they cut across the traditional distinction between State and civil society. They effectively bridge the gap between the national and international level, between governments, the UN system, civil society and people and engage thereby the broad range of national-level actors, such as parliaments, civil society and special interest groups, business and the judiciary. They combine a broad State mandate with independence and autonomy. And they come in all shapes and sizes – Human Rights Commissions, Ombudsmen, Defensores del Pueblo, Procurators for human rights, National Advisory Commissions on human rights, and so on. But no matter in which form, NHRIs assist and advise States on the implementation of international human rights norms and UN recommendations. For example, they often play an important role in supporting States efforts to develop national action plans.

They also can play a role in advancing all aspects of the rule of law, including with regard to the judiciary, law enforcement agencies and the correctional system. And in the context of the Human Rights Council, they help to fulfil the imperative that discussions taking place in Room XX are translated into effective actions and have a meaningful impact on the lives of people. And this is what makes them one of the most powerful allies the Council has in order to deliver results in the improvement of human rights on the ground.

Furthermore, the distinctiveness of A-status NHRIs is also clearly evident in the Universal Periodic Review process, to which they are important stakeholders. Their unique position as local independent entities allows them to provide us with the “reality on the ground”. They can offer detailed knowledge on the local implementation of our stated commitments, indicate where human rights challenges lie and offer advice on how to implement recommendations received through the UPR mechanism.

NHRIs in the UPR process

Moreover, in recent years, further progress has been made to enhance the participation of NHRIs in the context of the UPR. With the broadening of their contribution opportunities, as per the outcome of the review of the Council in 2011 and through resolution 16/21, NHRIs are now involved in all UPR stages. This includes participating in State consultations prior to the preparation of the State report, evaluating the human rights performance of their State, offering independent and authoritative evidence on national situations, making specific recommendations on future actions, all the way to supporting the follow-up to recommendations and providing advice to the State on implementation of recommendations. For example, during my country’s UPR in 2013, the German National Human Rights Institution submitted a comprehensive report to the UPR procedure and contributed more than 30 recommendations to Germany. Subsequent to the UPR process, the institution has engaged actively in the implementation of the recommendations made. Following implementation efforts, many NHRIs are now preparing for the mid-term reporting process in January 2016 to present the progress made domestically. Such examples serve to highlight why it is essential to support NHRIs in compliance with the Paris Principles in order to strengthen human rights on the national level. In addition, national institutions are of great importance during the adoption of the UPR Working Group report. A-status NHRIs are allowed to intervene immediately following remarks made by the State under review. To further underline their privileged role and to allow them to inform the Council’s deliberations, their contributions to the UPR report are recorded under a separate section.

NHRIs and Special Procedures

Beyond the UPR, the close interaction between NHRIs and the Council is also exemplified by their contributions to Special Procedures. For example, national institutions help monitor and encourage the local implementation of the recommendations of Special Rapporteurs on thematic issues. In addition, their participation in the HRC’s many mechanisms and bodies, including inter alia in the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Council’s Advisory Committee and the Forum for Business and Human Rights, has continuously helped to enrich the dialogue among States and other stakeholders. Through their work, they have also contributed to the development of international norms and standards such as the guiding
In fact, in the midst of increasingly complex cross-regional economic, social and political crises, NHRIs have become more relevant than ever in promoting a global public debate on human rights among different actors and in advancing all aspects of the rule of law.

**More NHRI participation needed at the Human Rights Council and the UN**

They also have a crucial role in raising international awareness about human rights violations, holding States accountable for their commitments and for effectively implementing international human rights standards. Overall, by sharing their national experiences, NHRIs help develop dynamic and interconnected civil society organizations, as well as alert and responsive media. Finally, NHRIs can bring human rights aspects into the discussions of other agendas, such as-for example- on sustainable development or transnational governance. I believe, the international community increasingly acknowledges this role.

With a view ahead, the HRC must continue to forge stronger partnerships with national institutions as vital components of the global human rights architecture. Establishing Paris Principles-compliant national human rights institutions and further encouraging their positive contributions to the Human Rights Council is in the best interest of all States. Because, from interventions under agenda items in the Council, to participation in plenary debates and interactive dialogues, NHRIs can make contributions that can have a significant impact on the people whose interests we aim to defend; namely the victims of violations and abuses of their inalienable human rights all around the world.