

# BLIHR

BUSINESS LEADERS INITIATIVE ON HUMAN RIGHTS

**PRESS RELEASE** (3 pages)

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## “Defining a role for business in human rights: Business Leaders announce a three-year initiative”

**London, Dec 9, 2003**

– An international initiative to better define the role of business in human rights was announced today by seven leading companies from a broad spectrum of industries. The Initiative is unique in its attempt to break down some of the barriers and uncertainties that have kept many responsible companies from realising their role in supporting universal human rights.

The three-year programme to help lead and develop the corporate response to human rights was announced at the **2003 Business and Human Rights Seminar** in London, which is being led by Mary Robinson, the former President of Ireland and former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Mrs. Robinson is currently Executive Director of the Ethical Globalisation Initiative and Chair of the newly formed Business Leaders Initiative on Human Rights (BLIHR) which aims to help mainstream human rights within the business sector through its own work and by supporting the work of others.

*“Is the human rights community asking the private sector to replace governments in human rights promotion and protection? The answer is absolutely not. What we hope to see is a steady increase in the number of companies that look seriously at international human rights standards when making decisions about their operating methods, personnel policies, procurement and investment decisions, among others.”*

*- Mary Robinson*

The seven companies to launch the Business Leaders Initiative on Human Rights are **ABB, Barclays, MTV Europe, National Grid Transco, Novartis, Novo Nordisk** and **The Body Shop International**. The companies are seeking to strengthen human rights within the business sector through their own operations and by supporting the work of others.

The initiative was announced on the eve of the 55<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

At the seminar, business leaders are discussing ways in which business can promote human rights, the dilemmas that they face, decision-making processes and ways of strengthening the relationship of business to governments, NGOs and other sectors of society.

They are also focusing on ways of working with the newly conceived United Nations Norms on Business and Human Rights endorsed by the UN Human Rights Sub-Committee this summer.

In addition to Mary Robinson, speakers at the seminar include Chris Lendrum (Group Executive Director of Barclays PLC), James Ross (Deputy Chairman of National Grid Transco plc), Bjorn Edlund (Senior Vice President, ABB Ltd.), Irene Khan (Secretary General of Amnesty International), Dame Anita Roddick (founder of The Body Shop), Jeremy Hobbs (Executive Director of Oxfam International) and David Weissbrodt (member of the UN Human Rights Sub-Commission).

### **Launching the initiative, the business leaders issued a joint statement:**

“As companies involved in the Business Leaders Initiative on Human Rights, we recognise the essential role of human rights as part of good corporate governance. We believe that business can fulfil a role in supporting greater respect for human rights around the world. Our intention is to find practical ways of applying the aspirations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights within a business context and to inspire other businesses to do likewise.

We support the work of the United Nations, Governments, Trade Unions and Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in protecting and promoting universal human rights. Although the role of business should in no way undermine or replace the fundamental human rights responsibilities of governments, there is much that can be done by companies to help fulfil and uphold these rights. NGOs and other non-state actors also have important roles to play and we should all aspire to abide by the principles of accountability and transparency that are central to social responsibility.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides a common framework within which responsible business can address these important issues and helps shed light on where the respective responsibilities of government, business and wider civil society lie. As we work through the way human rights relate to various business sectors and across different regions of the world, we will identify some of the critical dilemmas and challenges facing business. Over the next three years, our intention is also to develop a toolkit for business, to offer practical support in implementing the principles of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

An important contribution during 2003 has been the work of the UN Human Rights Sub-Commission in adopting Human Rights Norms for transnational and other businesses. We will give serious consideration to the role these Norms might play in our own work.

As members of the Business Leaders Initiative on Human Rights, our claim to leadership is based on the role we can play in encouraging wider business interest in supporting the greater realisation of human rights around the world.”

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### **Notes to the Editor:**

**What is the Business and Human Rights Seminar?** ([www.business-and-human-rights-seminar.org](http://www.business-and-human-rights-seminar.org))

The 2003 Business and Human Rights Seminar is held in London on 9 December. It is the first of what will be an annual series of debates to draw attention to upcoming issues in the field of international business and human rights. The 2003 Seminar was organised by Respect/Europe and supported by the Ethical Globalisation Initiative, Amnesty International (UK), Oxfam International, the Prince of Wales International Business Leaders Forum and the Council for Education in World Citizenship.

**What is Respect/Europe?** ([www.respecteurope.com](http://www.respecteurope.com) and [www.respecttable.com](http://www.respecttable.com))

Respect was founded by Per Uno Alm and Kaj Embren, two of the founders of the Swedish Natural Step, in Stockholm in 1999, together with Anita and Gordon Roddick founders of The Body Shop. Its aim is to improve the environmental and social responsibility of business through a range of services and initiatives. Specific attention is paid to the potential for leadership, political relationships and the involvement of a broad range of stakeholders. Respect's international work started with the Business Leaders Initiative on Climate Change, which has been chaired by Margot Wallström the EU Environment Commissioner since 2001. In this same year, Respect worked with Swedish and South African businesses on a diversity initiative at the World Conference Against Racism and Xenophobia. Since then Respect has developed a successful diversity, climate change and stakeholder dialogue programmes for Swedish business. The Business Leaders Initiative on Human Rights was conceived in late 2002 and initiated at a meeting in Brussels in May 2003.

**What is the Ethical Globalisation Initiative?** ([www.eginitiative.org](http://www.eginitiative.org))

The Ethical Globalization Initiative (EGI) is a new project led by former President of Ireland and United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson. The EGI brings key stakeholders together in new alliances to integrate concepts of human rights, gender sensitivity and enhanced accountability into efforts to address global challenges and governance shortcomings.

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