RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP SUMMIT

SHAPING OUR FUTURE

Mary Robinson keynote speech focuses on human rights

February 1, 2009

Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland and former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, urged participants to engage more actively on human rights issues in her keynote address which opened the three-day Responsible Leadership Summit at IMD.

“In a world so deeply divided between rich and poor, North and South, religious and secular, us and them, we need more than ever common values – a ‘common standard of achievement’ as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights puts it,” she stated. “All of us need tools to hold governments accountable for their performance. The Universal Declaration, which has been affirmed and reaffirmed by governments for more than half a century, is central to that cause.”

Reflecting on the current economic crisis, Mrs Robinson opened her speech by citing recently released figures from the International Labor Organization indicating that in the worst case, global unemployment could increase by over 50 million people in 2009 compared to 2007, pushing up to 200 million workers into severe poverty.

“Lack of an effective response means even more people not being able to realize core human rights,” she noted. “Responding in a responsible way to the crisis, in my view, means prioritizing the interests of working women and men, not just capital. It means we need to expand decent employment and livelihood opportunities. This has been the missing link between growth and poverty reduction strategies of recent decades. We need policies that promote more jobs, and jobs that meet basic labour rights, but also expand social protection systems that shield people, especially the poor, against economic shocks. Equally important, we need to shape more participatory economic governance through social dialogue between workers, employers, governments and civil society more broadly.”

Mrs Robinson discussed the increased role business schools should play in promoting human rights and commended IMD President Dr John R. Wells for his initiative in

bringing responsible leadership to the forefront at IMD.

“Although corporate responsibility and sustainability have entered the academic field, there is still a great deal to be done to embed these approaches – and their links to human rights – in the mainstream of business education,” she said.

She described the Principles for Responsible Management Education, an initiative linked to the Global Compact to engage business schools and help shape curricula, research, teaching methodologies and institutional strategies to better reflect the experience of corporations grappling with a range of human rights issues.

Mrs Robinson also detailed how irresponsible business practices have also brought us to our current situation. She noted that public demands on companies and individual business leaders to demonstrate responsible behavior will only grow in the years to come. The focus of these demands will increasingly center around human rights principles and standards. She concluded her speech by laying out a challenge for the participants in attendance.

“Business managers who view human rights and other social issues as just philanthropy, or as an afterthought, will face a growing number of risks. I am hopeful that we will increasingly see the emergence of another kind of leader – one who is able to incorporate human rights and other ethical issues into her or his decision-making. That will not only be good for business, but it will also be a powerful force in realizing human rights for all.”