



**UN Forum on Business & Human Rights
Geneva, 4-5 December 2012**

**Keynote address by
European Union Special Representative for Human Rights,
Mr Stavros Lambrinidis**

For a long time, it has been clear that there should be a proper place for all stakeholders in the discussion on human rights and the role of corporations. We do now have it with this Forum, and I look forward to the discussions here today.

Looking at the numbers, it already looks like a big opportunity. It may not be unusual to bring different groups together, but it is unusual to do it on this scale.

The credit goes to many, but I would like to pay tribute to Professor John Ruggie for the way that he has steered this super-tanker into port, and to Mr Michael Addo, Ms Alexandra Guaqueta, Ms Margaret Jungk, Mr Puvan Selvanathan, Mr Pavel Sulyandziga – the members of the UN Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises – for successfully taking up the task of dissemination and implementation. The support provided by the High Commissioner and her office to this work is also important. And I would like to thank the core group of countries – Argentina, Ghana, India, Norway and Russia – for their leading role in sustaining global support on this long journey.

The EU is committed to making the most of this groundbreaking occasion, as part of our collective efforts to implement the UN Guiding Principles. As Special Representative, part of my role is to enhance dialogue with governments, international and regional organisations, as well as with civil society organisations, business and others. But many more colleagues from the European Union and its Member States will also be taking part in all the numerous working sessions.

We all come from different backgrounds, operating within our own constraints. Some bring human rights to business; others bring business to human rights; and some of us have worked in both fields. Now is a great chance to map out common ground.

Some basic ideas should inform all our thinking:

- Human rights mean good governance for all, and that is good for business;
- Whether employees or customers – all citizens deserve the same consideration;
- The great power of the private sector, if harnessed, can be a force for good: businesses can change lives, and in doing so can transform societies.

This session, though, is focused on the move from principles to implementation.

- CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY -

Our collective challenge is to build a model of competitiveness based on quality, not inequality. The EU is fully committed to keeping pace with best practice worldwide, including ILO core labour standards, as underlined in the recent EU Strategic Framework for Human Rights and Democracy. Our aim is to improve transparency along the whole length of the supply chain. One way that we are doing this is by incorporating CSR provisions in our new generation Free Trade Agreements.

If this whole process was easy there would be no need for us to be here. But we have made great strides over the past few years, not least thanks to the UN Guiding Principles.

The power of enterprises, especially large corporations, has increased dramatically in the last 25 years. The UN Guiding Principles offer a way to better hold that power to account. They are also an opportunity to hold governments to account for protecting human rights from violation by enterprises. They establish a global norm against which states and business will be judged, and are therefore key to providing greater access for victims to effective remedy, both judicial and otherwise.

That is why the UN Guiding Principles are a key point of reference for EU policy. The European Commission is currently working on a report on EU priorities for effective implementation of the UN Guiding Principles, as well as other policy initiatives.

More than two thirds of EU Member States have National Action Plans on business and human rights, or are in the process of creating them. This is good progress.

At EU level, the Commission is working to improve the functioning of the internal market, making a difference to sustainable growth and employment, whilst contributing to broad environmental and social objectives. This is part of a general effort to make European companies more competitive, modern, and accountable. To this end, the Commission has been looking at improving transparency and appropriate disclosure by large companies, including on human rights aspects. This is now at an advanced stage, and a legislative proposal should be announced soon.

Just published is an introductory guide to human rights for SMEs, aimed mainly at those in the EU. Also, the EU is supporting the development of human rights guidance for companies in three crucial sectors: oil & gas, ICT, and employment & recruitment agencies. This guidance aims to be as globally applicable as possible, whilst taking account of the particular circumstances of EU enterprises. It is critically important to us that this guidance is consistent with the UN Guiding Principles.

All three sets of sector guidance will soon be published for comment, and should be finalised by end April. The EU attaches great importance to promoting genuine multi-stakeholder dialogue on all aspects of our approach to business and human rights, and in that spirit I encourage you all to submit comments on the drafts.

In the same spirit, I and my colleagues have come to this Forum in listening mode, to gather ideas and take part in a conversation. We are committed to working with partners to make respect for human rights a natural reflex for any business. We already have a number of bilateral dialogues where corporate social responsibility and human rights are being raised, and we are looking to build on these.