

9th Annual UN Forum on Business and Human Rights

Opening High-Level Plenary Session

“Preventing business-related human rights abuses:
The key to a sustainable future for people and planet”

Keynote remarks by Mary Robinson
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Greetings to you all.

My thanks to Elisabeth Tichy-Fisslberger, President of the Human Rights Council, High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet and OHCHR colleagues, and the Working Group on Business and Human Rights, for bringing us all together this week. Thank you for inviting me to speak today and for your decision to highlight the critical links between human rights and a sustainable future.

As the High Commissioner has said, these are unprecedented times. We face multiple global crises, from the COVID19 pandemic and its resulting economic and social consequences, to mounting and ever more urgent impacts of climate change. From renewed forces of discrimination and division, to expanding inequalities and ineffective governance.

Despite travel restrictions preventing us from meeting in person, this year's Forum on Business and Human Rights nevertheless remains an invaluable opportunity to reflect on where we stand, nearly ten years on from the adoption of the UN Guiding Principles, and where we should be moving to advance the human rights and sustainable development agendas.

First, let's note some good news. When it comes to strategies to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, there is broad recognition today that business has a vital role to play. We know development progress is stronger when businesses improve treatment of workers and avoid harms to communities, by meeting their responsibilities consistent with the UNGPs.

And in efforts to confront the climate crisis, we see the growing influence of business leaders who have committed their companies to Net Zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. The private sector can be a positive force in ensuring climate justice, focused on just transitions to more sustainable economies in the years to come.

But we must acknowledge shortcomings as well.

Commitments to human rights action remain far too slow and still by far too few.

Many companies are still not aware of their responsibilities and too many who agree still avoid proactive engagement, in part because they have not been negatively spotlighted by the media, investors, or civil society. The results of the Corporate Human Rights Benchmark show spotlights can make a difference to prompt change, but we still have too few across business value chains.

At the same time, too few governments have demanded better performance through legislation, though the tide seems to be turning. I acknowledge and support the growing number of governments that are actively considering these stronger measures to prompt change and level the playing field.

So what needs to happen now?

Many more business leaders - those often not participating in events like this one - must step up to meet this moment. That means speaking out more forcefully, including through industry associations that are truly committed to

sustainability, to demand that governments look beyond short term perceived interests and put in place regulatory environments that will protect the planet and future generations, and recognize the business sector too must be accountable for its actions.

It also means investors taking greater steps to accelerate the shift to responsible and sustainable business models and moving away from long term investments in fossil fuels and other sectors that aren't sustainable. That tide too seems to be turning with the increasing interest in ESG investing, but we need profound changes, not just fiddling at the edges through small changes in ratings. I salute the EU for taking a lead in sustainable finance, including through incorporating the Guiding Principles and OECD Guidelines as a core part of defining which economic activities are sustainable.

In addition, we need more business leaders involved in the work to ensure effective joined up policy and action between the climate, development and human rights agendas. We are now beginning to see the fruits of our hard work in building bridges between the environment and human rights fields, in the power of human rights arguments in addressing climate change. But there is still much to be done to integrate robust

human rights due diligence processes within ongoing and future partnerships and strategies to meet the SDGs.

The UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights has developed useful recommendations on ways to strengthen the synergies between the SDGs and business and human rights that we should commit to implement. These rightly include calls for governments to ensure that their own business partners for development make clear and demonstrable commitments to the UN Guiding Principles.

And we shouldn't forget that the business and human rights agenda has its roots with human rights defenders who understand the connections between the environment, development and rights. They have and continue to play a critical role in articulating the demands of communities and individuals whose rights were affected by state and corporate actions or inactions.

Last week we honored the memory of the Ogoni Nine, including Ken Saro Wiwa, who were executed by the military regime in Nigeria 25 years ago for their activism protesting irresponsible corporate actions in the Niger Delta. 25 years later, we see evidence of the space for human rights defenders shrinking in countries around the world.

We all have a responsibility to champion human rights and environmental rights and protect defenders who seek justice. We all must stand up for press freedom and for trade union movements who continue to face serious threats as well. I'm happy to be associated with the annual speaker series organized by the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre that has been an important platform for advocates and defenders to share their experiences and build greater understanding of their vital work.

As we set our plans for the future and contribute to the Working Group's project to take stock during 2021 of the first ten years of the Guiding Principles, we should also renew our commitment to collective action that spans disciplines and constituencies.

I'm pleased that organizations in the business and human rights field are taking noteworthy steps in this direction. One example I wish to highlight is the new report released today by my colleagues at the Institute for Human Rights and Business, titled *Just Transitions for All: Business, Human Rights, and Climate Action*.

The new report explores a range of topics, including how business and human rights framing and perspectives can

build awareness of a wider range of impacts in just transition planning and implementation, beyond the workplace boundaries. It also reflects on how human rights due diligence offers a practical tool for addressing wider implications of transition processes, for example, on communities and indigenous peoples and how it can extend understanding of just transition into value chains and business relationships to achieve better outcomes for more people, in particular the most vulnerable and marginalized.

I'll be participating in an online event on Human Rights Day - 10 December - at which IHRB will be focusing on these issues with a particular look at the roles of investors and the financial community. It is that kind of joined up multi-stakeholder dialogue and action we need much more of in the time ahead.

I'm also honored to serve as founding Chair of the Centre for Sport and Human Rights, which is taking a similar approach to collective action with the broad sport ecosystem around the world.

As has been said many times but needs repeating, we must use this moment not just to find a way back to "business as usual", but instead to "build back better". A recent letter to

G20 countries from leading business groups, including the B Team, which I work with, stresses that emergency responses and long term economic recovery must involve decisive actions to tackle inequality through social protection. That includes steps to protect vulnerable populations, secure jobs and enforce strong labor and human rights standards. I would add as well that ongoing efforts to develop treatments and vaccines for COVID19 must include plans to ensure access for all.

I conclude by recalling that the field of business and human rights remains a relatively new area for the large majority of companies. We should acknowledge the crucial groundwork that has been achieved over a relatively short period, including steady uptake of the UNGPs and their alignment across many international and regional organizations, industry sectors, and individual businesses.

We should continue to build on that work, including through new forms of partnership that bring grassroots actors and affected groups more directly into business and human rights discussions and collective responses.

I urge you all to continue to move forward in ways that build on the Guiding Principles and demand stronger

accountability. We know that lasting change for the better happens by facing complex problems together.

Thank you.