

Introductory remarks by Mr Michael Addo

Chairperson of the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights

Side event: The role of human rights defenders in promoting corporate responsibility

HRC26 – Friday 13 June

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Thank you

Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen: I am very pleased to be able to participate in this meeting on the role of human rights defenders in promoting corporate responsibility.

My sincere apologies in advance for having to depart before the end of proceedings in order to attend another side event, which the Working Group is co-hosting, on how to ensure a gender perspective in the implementation of the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

The crucial role that human rights defenders play

Human rights defenders play a crucial role as:

- Advocates and defenders of the rights of vulnerable groups and communities;
- Public watchdogs for public interest issues; and
- Facilitators in policy making.

These are important roles that they assume in any democratic society and yet the irony of these roles is that they expose human rights defenders to unspeakable human rights violations and abuses from both public authorities and from non-State actors.

What the Guiding Principles say about human rights defenders

The Guiding Principles recognize the roles played by human rights defenders and the risks associated with them. For example:

- In its elaboration of the proposal in Guiding Principle 18 for businesses to undertake meaningful consultation as part of gauging human rights risks, the commentary to that

principle urges businesses to consult human rights defenders as an independent expert resource. We see here the recognition of the roles of human rights defenders as watchdogs, advocates and facilitators.

- In the context of recognising the potential risks to human rights defenders, when Guiding Principle 26 urges States to take steps to ensure the effectiveness of domestic judicial mechanisms, the commentary proposes that States should ensure *inter alia* that the legitimate and peaceful activities of the human rights defenders are not obstructed.

Working Group activities to promote the role of human rights defenders:

In recognition of the crucial role that human rights defenders play, the Working Group has made the subject of human rights defenders an important theme in its work.

At last year's annual Forum on Business and Human Rights the Working Group devoted one of the official plenary sessions to this topic with a number of prominent speakers including the Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz and the previous UN Special Rapporteur on the situation facing human rights defenders, Margaret Sekaggya.

The Working Group has also addressed threats faced by human rights defenders in its dialogue with States and companies, in written communications including joint communications with other Special Procedure mandate holders as well as during our country visits.

The Working Group has also joined panels organised under the auspices of other regional groups, such as the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights, to emphasise the integrated concern for human rights defenders.

Furthermore, the Working Group is currently encouraging States to assess gaps in the protection of human rights in the context of business operations at the national level through the development of national action plans. In this context too, the Working Group expects national authorities to address the extent to which human rights defenders who focus on business-related impacts are not obstructed and at the same time given adequate protection against threats and harassment.

The subject remains of central importance to the work of the Working Group and we look forward to the outcomes of your deliberations today.

I thank you for your attention.



'From threats to opportunities'
Business and Human Rights Defenders
Side Event
Friday 13 June 2014, 12.15 - 13.45
Room IX, Palais des Nations, Geneva

Human rights defenders working on issues of corporate responsibility and accountability are under increasing threat around the world. The challenge for the Human Rights Council is to provide the right mix of incentives and pressure to ensure that States and businesses protect human rights defenders and their work, recognising that their participation represents an opportunity rather than a threat.

This panel will highlight the role of human rights defenders in promoting corporate responsibility and in exposing and remedying the adverse human rights impacts of business. The discussion will also spotlight the threats and attacks that human rights defenders face from both State and non-State actors because of this work. The event aims to inform the Human Rights Council's response to these issues through a resolution on business and human rights due be adopted during the 26th session.

Panelists

- Michel Forst, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders
- Maria Belen Paez, President, Fundación Pachamama, Ecuador
- Simone Sonn, Programme Coordinator, Legal Resources Centre, South Africa
- Alice Harrison, Communications Adviser, Global Witness

Moderator

- Phil Lynch, Director, International Service for Human Rights

For those unable to attend, a live webcast will be available at www.ishr.ch/webcast.

You may also follow the event on Twitter [@ISHRGlobal](https://twitter.com/ISHRGlobal), using the hashtag **#HRDs**.