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Action plan on human rights must go beyond business as usual

A coalition of human rights and development NGOs, alongside unions, has given a cautious welcome to today's launch of an official UK government Action Plan on Business and Human Rights by Vince Cable and William Hague.

The CORE Coalition, whose members include Amnesty International, Oxfam, CAFOD and War on Want, supported by the Trades Union Congress, share the plan's clear expectation that UK companies respect human rights throughout their global operations and supply chains, but question whether the government's proposals will be sufficient to reduce corporate abuses. CORE calls on the government to take effective steps to ensure companies respect human rights.

The plan builds on the government's commitment to implement the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, agreed by the UN Human Rights Council in 2011. The principles set out what states need to do to protect people from corporate human rights abuses and the actions that businesses should take to respect human rights.

Marilyn Croser, Coordinator of the CORE Coalition said:

"While it's positive that the plan sets out clear expectations for UK companies to respect human rights wherever they operate and explicitly applies to businesses' supply chains in the UK and overseas, there's little clarity on how the government's approach will require companies with the worst human rights records to change their behaviour. Sharing good practice and offering guidance for businesses are important but are not enough on their own."

Anne Lindsay, CAFOD's Lead Analyst on the Private Sector said:

"For local communities in countries such as Colombia, Peru and the Philippines, the key question is, will this action plan prevent abuses of human rights by companies or just maintain the status quo? We welcome the references to protection of human rights defenders and investment agreements for example but these principles need to be linked to a much more comprehensive set of follow up actions."

Oxfam's Robert Nash, Private Sector Policy Adviser said:

"This is a welcome signal to businesses that corporate abuses must be tackled. However, plans must go further to strengthen protection for vulnerable communities and the means for them to seek redress. This includes identifying and addressing failures on vital issues like the governance of land, transparency and accountability of investments, human rights requirements and empowering women, who are often the most at risk yet the most likely to be excluded from having their voices heard."

The absence of clear commitments to improve access to justice for victims of corporate human rights abuse overseas and the reliance on voluntary corporate self-governance to ensure businesses respect for human rights is of particular concern to CORE and its member organisations.

Murray Worthy, Senior Economic Justice Campaigner at War on Want said:

"This plan places the burden of responsibility for businesses' respect for human rights in the hands of the companies responsible for violations of human rights. Such voluntary self-regulation has been found wanting for years. It failed to prevent the deaths through negligence of over 1,100 Bangladeshi garment workers in the Rana Plaza disaster earlier this year. Now the government wants to extend this model so that even private military and security companies become self-regulating. The government needs to be more rigorous in preventing human rights abuses by UK companies."

Owen Tudor, Head of the TUC's European Union and International Relations Department said:

"Global businesses mustn't be allowed to avoid their ethical duties, and governments must work with unions and campaigners to hold them to account. The UN and the ILO have set international standards for corporate behaviour and this action plan is a key element in making sure multi-nationals meet those standards."

Globalisation has let too many businesses undercut livelihoods at home by exploiting people abroad. Unions will seek to build on this action plan but won't hesitate to demand stronger action if it is needed."

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