



Shift



13 September 2017

An open letter to United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres and United Nations Private Sector Forum 2017 Participants:

As global business, government and civil society leaders convene for next week's United Nations Private Sector Forum to discuss financing the 2030 Agenda, it is difficult to overstate the challenge that has brought them together. Ensuring the eradication of poverty through sustainable, climate conscious, and rights-respecting global development is an ambitious universal agenda. We urge participants to ensure that respect for human rights is an integral part of all actions towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The SDGs 'seek to realize the human rights of all' and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is explicitly grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international human rights treaties, among other instruments. The Agenda emphasizes the critical role that human rights play in the achievement of sustainable development in all its three dimensions – economic, social and environmental.

To put this in context, between 21 and 48 million people are estimated to work in forms of modern slavery; around 85 million of the estimated 168 million child labourers are in hazardous forms of work; and more than 2.3 million people die annually as a result of occupational accidents or work-related diseases. Poor communities lose livelihoods, access to healthcare and clean water when land is taken or used without respect for their rights in the name of agriculture, construction, mining and other activities. Ending such abuses would enable these people to live their lives with dignity, with improved access to education, medical care, food, and many other SDG targets.

Businesses must put these realities at the heart of how they define their contribution to Agenda 2030. Doing so represents the private sector's single biggest opportunity to advance human development today.

Business responsibility for respecting human rights is too often viewed only as a matter of compliance and risk management, distinct from initiatives seen as more innovative, leadership-oriented and transformative. This overestimates progress to date by business leaders in preventing and addressing their own adverse human rights impacts. But it also underestimates the hugely positive development impacts that will be achieved through improved treatment of the millions of workers and communities affected by business activities around the world.

Advancing human rights due diligence as a core element of SDG implementation strategies requires strengthened commitments from governments as well as business. For business to make its greatest possible contribution to sustainable development, states and business must:

- **put respect for human rights at the heart of how business gets done**, by implementing the global standard of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights;
- **engage in collaborative initiatives** to tackle systemic challenges – leadership is already being demonstrated here with efforts such as the ACT initiative on living wages in the apparel sector and the Bangladesh Accord;

- **ensure the regulatory environment protects human rights, including the rights of workers and impacted communities**, thereby facilitating a level playing field for responsible business;
- **be transparent and accountable** about their efforts, including partnerships to implement the SDGs.

These actions remain too few and far between. Both governments and businesses should avoid approaches which simply re-package existing commitments, or which focus only on goals that are convenient to existing interests and initiatives. With SDGs achievement resting on an additional annual investment of \$USD 2.5 trillion, we need an upsurge in innovative and collaborative ways of placing respect for the dignity of every person at the core of sustainable development – not the old wine of investment and sustainability strategies in new SDG bottles.

Ratcheting up energy, resources, and creative thinking on how to embed respect for human rights across business is the radical approach needed for companies to help deliver the ‘people part’ of the SDGs. This year’s Private Sector Forum presents an important opportunity to discuss and embed such transformative thinking into mainstream conversations and actions needed to achieve the world we want.

Yours sincerely,

Phil Bloomer
Executive Director
Business & Human Rights Resource Centre

Amol Mehra
Executive Director
International Corporate Accountability Roundtable

Eva Grambye
International Director
Danish Institute for Human Rights

Winnie Byanyima
Executive Director
Oxfam International

John Morrison
Chief Executive
Institute for Human Rights and Business

Caroline Rees
President
Shift