

PRESS STATEMENT
13 August 2003
Palais de Nations, Geneva

NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS WELCOME THE NEW U.N. NORMS ON TRANSNATIONAL BUSINESS

Today, a United Nations human rights body in Geneva adopted the first set of comprehensive international human rights norms specifically applying to transnational corporations and other businesses. The nongovernmental organizations joining in this statement come together to welcome the U.N. Human Rights Norms and Commentary, and to urge their supporters and others concerned with human rights, the environment, and development to begin using them to spur greater corporate social responsibility.

Historically, international human rights law has focused on state responsibilities. While international law also places obligations on businesses, there is a need to clarify the scope of those obligations in a changing world. As global businesses have expanded their power in the world, an increasing number of U.N. bodies and others have recognized that with greater power should come greater responsibility. By adopting today the new "U.N. Norms on the Responsibilities of Transnational Corporations and Other Business Enterprises with regard to Human Rights," the U.N. Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights fills the gap by pulling together into one document the key international human rights laws, standards, and best practices applying to all businesses. These more detailed U.N. Norms are thus complementary to the U.N. Global Compact, as acknowledged by the U.N. Global Compact Office.

The new U.N. Human Rights Norms, and the accompanying interpretive Commentary, constitute an authoritative interpretation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. The Universal Declaration applies not only to states and individuals, but also to "organs of society", including businesses. In addition to the Universal Declaration and the principal human rights treaties, the U.N. Human Rights Norms and Commentary rely upon and restate the relevant principles from a wide range of labor, environmental, consumer protection, and anti-corruption treaties and other international instruments. As such they provide a useful checklist for companies on how to act consistently with international norms.

No responsible corporation wants to be a party to abusive working conditions or other human rights violations. The U.N. Human Rights Norms and the explanatory Commentary will help businesses know and comply with the relevant human rights laws, and will provide a clear road map to action that transcends the conflicting provisions of the various private codes of conduct. Although some difficult issues of interpretation will remain, the U.N. Human Rights Norms and the interpretive Commentary now put the U.N. imprimatur on much more detailed guidelines as to proper action. They also endorse methods of independent monitoring and other implementation mechanisms to hold businesses accountable for violations of human rights, humanitarian, labor, environmental, and other international principles and best practices, and will contribute to further international legal development along these lines.

In an increasingly interdependent world, where poverty, disease, violence, crime, war, regional conflicts, and human rights and environmental abuses persist, clear international standards will help ensure that business will be part of the solution to today's problems and not – knowingly or unknowingly -- exacerbate them. To meet the new challenges with a sensible legal framework for business behavior is in the interests of the companies themselves, as well as their workers, shareholders, communities, and other stakeholders. Indeed, the U.N. Human Rights Norms can make a substantial contribution to long-term development and poverty reduction, which benefits both business and society.

The nongovernmental organizations joining this Statement represent many other organizations who support the U.N. Norms (as in the case for example with Amnesty International, which has garnered the support of over 60 other organizations, Christian Aid, which works with over 500 partner organizations, the Forum for Human Rights, which has over 40 member organizations in Germany alone, FIDH, which represents over 100 member organizations, and OMCT, which represents over 260 organizations). This significant number of civil society organizations applauds the U.N. Sub-Commission and its Working Group on Transnational Corporations for bringing this multi-year effort to such a successful conclusion, and looks forward to using the U.N. Human Rights Norms and Commentary in their work.

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