

Transforming business to protect people and our common home

Why it's now time to tackle corporate abuse

'Indigenous communities must be protected from companies, particularly multinational companies, that "operate in less developed countries in ways they could never do at home" (LS, 51), through the destructive extraction of fossil fuels, minerals, timber and agro-industrial products.'

Pope Francis's message for the World Day of Prayer for Creation 2020

With COP26 over, it's now time to double down on our efforts to protect our common home and turn our attention to some of the other players whose actions must be addressed if we are to tackle the climate crisis and global poverty.

We know that around the world, communities CAFOD works with are experiencing the impacts of climate crisis, human rights abuses and environmental destruction, and this is linked to the activities of UK companies. This includes worker exploitation, water pollution from industrial activity, large-scale deforestation, removal of communities from lands and abuse and killing of human rights and environmental defenders who resist the presence and operations of harmful businesses.

Did you know that just 100 fossil fuel companies have been the source of [71 per cent](#) of the world's greenhouse gas emissions since 1988?

At present, big companies can reap the benefits of exploitation in the countries from which these resources are sourced while hiding behind lengthy and complex global supply chains, dodging responsibility for the social and environmental costs of their subsidiaries and suppliers.

How do they get away with this? **Current laws aren't enough to stop this abuse** and it's often very difficult for those harmed to get justice for what they suffer. So-called 'corporate social responsibility' – voluntary measures to address companies' social and environmental impacts – has failed to change the status quo. These initiatives rely on a company's goodwill, but are often a form of 'washing' what a company may really be doing. They mean that responsible companies can be undercut by others who prioritise short-term profit over people's livelihoods and our common home.

While the UK has made some progress in introducing legislation, such as the Modern Slavery Act which was passed in 2015 to ensure more transparency in supply chains, it's clear that just requiring companies to be transparent isn't enough to prevent abuse. The Modern Slavery Act also doesn't cover many of the impacts business activities have on the communities CAFOD works with, such as mass pollution and attacks on human rights defenders.

In La Guajira, Colombia, it has been reported that more than 20 communities have been forcibly displaced or disposed as a result of the huge open-pit [Cerrejón coal mine](#). The Wayúu women, who have a deep connection to their land and water, have been deeply impacted, and have reported that **more than 17 streams have been redirected or polluted**.

The mine was jointly owned by UK-based company BHP and London-listed Anglo American and Glencore until 2021, with Glencore recently taking full ownership. These companies have profited from the mine, but questions have been raised as to whether they have taken sufficient action to deal with these issues. Local communities have complained that the company has failed to fully comply with more than 10 Colombia court rulings, or to heed calls from several prominent [UN human rights experts](#) for the mine's operations to be suspended.

Our faith calls us to act

Pope Francis [calls on us](#) to strengthen national and international legislation to regulate the activities of extractive companies and ensure access to justice for those affected. [More than 100 bishops worldwide have called for an end to corporate abuse](#), declaring that “States all over the world have a unique opportunity to step up and stop this by introducing binding measures.”

Heeding this call, CAFOD is calling for the UK government to introduce **a new Business, Human Rights and Environment Act** to hold business to account when they fail to prevent supply chain human rights abuses and environmental harms.

- This new law would make sure that companies act to **prevent** human rights and environmental abuses happening in the first place – through conducting what we call ‘human rights and environmental due diligence’, which means identifying and taking steps to address risks to human rights and the environment that their activities pose across their global supply chains and operations.
- It doesn’t matter where in the world they operate – businesses based in the UK need to make absolutely sure that they are not putting people's lives and our common home at risk, and they must be held **accountable** when they are.
- If this law passed, it would mean that companies would need to be much more careful in the way they operate abroad – and people around the world would suffer from fewer human rights abuses and less environmental destruction. If companies failed to do proper due diligence which then led to harm people or our common home, then those harmed by the operations of a UK company could access **justice** in a UK court.

The good news is that MPs on the [Joint Committee on Human Rights](#) already came out in support of this law a few years ago, and now, leading UK businesses such as Tesco and John Lewis are saying that stronger regulation is needed – to bring up standards for all businesses. But we are still a very long way from seeing the new law we are calling for become reality.

Take action now to contact your MP and ask them to sign the pledge to support a new law at cafod.org.uk/newlaw