

Business and Human Rights



BACKGROUND

Many of the goods we consume in the UK – from the clothes we wear to the food we eat – are provided by multinational companies who preside over vast supply chains that can cross many countries, and often involve some of the world's poorest communities.

While these companies make huge profits supplying food, minerals and other goods to consumers in the UK, their supply chains are often riddled with social and environmental abuses.

These abuses include forced removal of people from their land, exploitative working practices and even modern slavery. Shockingly, the International Labour Organisation estimates that almost 50 million people are currently living in modern slavery.¹

Irresponsible business practices can also lead to extensive environmental damage, pollution and deforestation of lands that communities depend on for their livelihoods. When human rights defenders speak up to defend their rights and land, they are often faced with intimidation and violence.²

The huge power imbalance between large companies and communities and workers across the Global South means that it's often very difficult for affected people to claim their rights, secure justice or reparation for the harms they suffer.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

CAFOD is calling for a new law to prevent abuses of people's human rights and their environment, and ensure the victims have access to justice. This law – a Business, Human Rights and Environment Act – would require companies to take reasonable steps to prevent abuses occurring in their business activities and supply chains, and those of their subsidiaries.

Such legislation has been called for by 50 UK businesses and investors including the British Retail Consortium, John Lewis, Tesco and Aviva,³ as well as nearly 40 UK NGOs and trade unions. Polling indicates four in five members of the British public would support a new law.⁴

This new legislation would ensure a fair playing field for businesses operating in the UK market as they would all be required to undertake human rights and environmental due diligence throughout their supply chains.

CASE STUDY

*“We knew in our gut that we wanted to do something, to show them that people are dying from lung disease, that the smell and fumes from the coal make the children sick.” **Young woman from indigenous community affected by Cerrejon mine, Colombia**⁵*

For over thirty years, the vast open-pit Cerrejón mine has extracted coal from the territories of Wayuu indigenous and Afro-descendant communities in the La Guajira region of Colombia. Villages have been forcibly and violently displaced, air and water has been dangerously contaminated and water supplies have been depleted. The affected communities have repeatedly challenged the harm caused by the mine. But, despite many legal rulings related to these abuses in the Colombian courts, Glencore has refused to take responsibility for the damage it has caused. Instead, it has filed a counter-case against the Colombian government under international trade law.

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR CANDIDATES

1. Many of the things we consume in the UK are produced via supply chains that span the world. Throughout these global supply chains, it is too often the case that workers are exploited, and/or the environment is damaged. Would you support the introduction of legislation for greater oversight of business practices through these supply chains?
2. If elected, what steps would you take to ensure businesses are held responsible for their operations, both at home and abroad to ensure workers' rights are upheld, and the natural environment is protected?

MORE INFORMATION

- The Business & Human Rights Resource Centre recorded 615 attacks in 2021 against human rights defenders after they raised concerns about business activities, 70 per cent of these were against climate, land and environmental rights defenders.⁶
- Establishing a law to prevent human rights and environmental abuses was recommended by Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights.⁷
- 12 per cent of the 50 million people currently in forced labour worldwide are children.⁸
- In 2011, the UN introduced the 'Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights' in 2011⁹ which called on companies to prevent human rights abuses in their supply chains. It called on countries to introduce laws that compel businesses to take action. France, Germany and New Zealand are already putting such laws into place.

1 <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/forced-labour/lang--en/index.htm>

2 <https://cafod.org.uk/about-us/policy-and-research/private-sector/human-rights-latin-america>

3 <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/uk-business-support-for-human-rights-due-diligence-legislation/>

4 <https://corporatejusticecoalition.org/news/press/press-release-yougov-poll-shows-4-in-5-of-the-british-public-want-law-to-prevent-business-human-rights-and-environmental-harm-businesses-and-investors-agree/>

5 *Young woman from Provincial indigenous reservation (2021)*, quoted in CINEP 2023 report 'Does Cerrejon always win?'. Available at: https://www.cinep.org.co/publi-files/PDFS/20231114_Glencore_Report_EN.pdf

6 <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/from-us/briefings/hrds-2021/>

7 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201719/jtselect/jtrights/686/686.pdf>

8 <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/forced-labour/lang--en/index.htm>

9 https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf