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Following Rio+20, UN expert body calls on businesses to respect human rights



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A United Nations expert body today expressed concern that the outcome document agreed at the recent UN Conference on Sustainable Development ([Rio+20](#)) failed to explicitly mention that businesses must respect human rights.

“Businesses will play a major role in developing the green economy and human rights safeguards are necessary to ensure that policies and business plans intended to advance environmental or development goals do not negatively impact people, communities and their livelihoods,” said the head of the five-strong UN Working Group on Human Rights and Transnational Corporations and Other Business Enterprises, Puvan Selvanathan.

“Inclusive, equitable and sustainable development can only become a reality when human beings are the central concern and their rights are realized and respected,” Mr. Selvanathan stressed in a news release.

Governments need to send clear messages to companies on the respect of human rights as the world creates a green economy, Mr. Selvanathan emphasized, adding that they should provide

them with access to effective remedies for those whose rights have been affected by business activities.

More than 40,000 people – including parliamentarians, mayors, UN officials, chief executive officers and civil society leaders – attended Rio+20 from 20-22 June.

The agreed outcome document calls for a wide range of actions. These include beginning the process to establish sustainable development goals; detailing how the green economy can be used as a tool to achieve sustainable development; strengthening the UN Environment Programme ([UNEP](#)); promoting corporate sustainability reporting measures; taking steps to go beyond gross domestic product to assess the well-being of a country; developing a strategy for sustainable development financing; and, adopting a framework for tackling sustainable consumption and production.

It also focuses on improving gender equity; recognizing the importance of voluntary commitments on sustainable development; and stressing the need to engage civil society and incorporate science into policy; among other points.

The Working Group called on States and business to work with it, civil society and other stakeholders, on ensuring that the path to sustainable development set up at Rio+20 is undertaken, while protecting and respecting human rights.

For her part, the UN Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation, Catarina de Albuquerque, welcomed the explicit commitment to progressively implement the right to safe drinking water and sanitation in the Rio+20 outcome document. However, she warned that “progressive realization” must not delay full implementation.

“‘Progressive realization of the right’ requires States to take concrete steps for its full realization to the maximum of available resources, including through international cooperation,” Ms. de Albuquerque said. “‘Progressive realization’ is not an excuse to postpone implementation, but rather calls for immediate steps, as well as for developing a roadmap to implement it.”

Ms. de Albuquerque reaffirmed her commitment to work with all States and stakeholders to develop sustainable development and post-2015 development goals for water and sanitation that ensure equality and non-discrimination as well as other human rights obligations.

“The future we want is within reach – it is a matter of will, courage and vision by the world’s governments,” she stated.

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