

Programme on the Hearing on Corporate Social Responsibility

Brussels, 23 January 2007

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a concept that suggests that commercial corporations have a duty of care to all of their stakeholders in all aspects of their business operations. A company's stakeholders are all those who are influenced by, or can influence, a business's decisions and actions. CSR requires that businesses account for and measure the actual or potential economic, social and environmental impacts of their decisions. CSR is closely linked with the principles of Sustainable Development.

This hearing on Corporate Social Responsibility will focus on the relation between human rights and business, both from a positive and a negative perspective, with a special attention on European activities in third countries. Multinational companies can contribute to the improvement of the local environment in which they are operating, but they can also be part of human rights violations, and most particularly so in weak governance zones.

A growing challenge is to define the extent of a company's responsibility, and to be able to differentiate, or identify the interrelation, between a company's responsibility and the general human rights situation in a specific country. The concept of sphere of influence, which refers to both the direct and indirect impact of business in society, needs therefore to be developed.

This hearing must also be put in the context of the ongoing debates and initiatives, at a European as well as a global level, in international organizations such as the UN and OECD.

In March 2006 the European Commission presented its last communication on CSR "Implementing the partnership for growth and jobs: making Europe a pole of excellence on Corporate Social Responsibility. The EU has also been an active part of the preparative work for the OECD Risk Awareness Tool for Multinational Enterprises in Weak Governance Zones, which addresses, among other things, the need to observe international human rights instruments and the human rights challenges related to the management of security forces.

In July 2005, Mr John Ruggie was appointed as UN Special Representative on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises. His first interim report was presented in early 2006.

Through concrete examples, this hearing intends to answer questions such as: How can companies contribute to the improvement of the overall human rights situation in third countries? What could the EU do to minimize the negative impacts on human rights of the multinationals activities, without bringing too many constraints on companies? What can the EU do in order to clarify the information on

the different codes of conduct and existing tools, in order to make them credible and transparent?

Programme :

Mr Richard Howitt

Vice Chair of the Subcommittee on Human Rights,
European Parliament Rapporteur on Corporate Social Responsibility

Nick Owen (The International Commission of Jurists)

Programme Officer, International Economic Relations Programme

Paul de Clerck (Friends of the Earth)

The impact of the palm oil industry in Indonesia/Malaysia

Ineke Zeldenrust (Clean clothes Campaign)

The Clean Clothes Campaign is an international campaign, focused on improving working conditions in the global garment and sportswear industries. There is a Clean Clothes Campaign in 9 European countries.

The Business Leaders Initiative on Human Rights

This is a programme that helps lead and develop the corporate response to human rights.

John Evans (Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD)