

Business Leaders Initiative on Human Rights (BLIHR)

**Speech delivered to the United Nations General Assembly preparatory process for the High-level  
Plenary meeting on 14-16 September 2005**

Speech delivered by Gareth Llewellyn, Group Director for Corporate Responsibility, National Grid  
Transco plc on behalf of the BLIHR and all the companies involved

**Hearing on Freedom to Live in Dignity**

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The Business Leaders Initiative on Human Rights is grateful for this opportunity to make a contribution to the process leading up to the very important high-level General Assembly meeting this September.

The ten companies that lead the Business Leaders Initiative on Human Rights, including the one I myself work for, have been working for two years to find ways of applying human rights principles and standards across a range of business sectors, issues and geographic locations. We believe that human rights are part of the “business of business” and we have taken a positive approach to examining the content of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights within a business context and the main components of international human rights law that flow from it. Although it does not represent a legal standard, we have also found much of the content of the “Norms of the Responsibilities of Transnational Enterprises and Other Business Enterprises with Regard to Human Rights” adopted by the UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in 2003 to have been of great assistance in this process.

It is important to point out here that acknowledgement of greater business responsibility for human rights should in no way remove or undermine the role of governments as the primary duty-bearer for the fulfilment of human rights obligations. We welcome the Secretary General’s call in his report “In Larger Freedom” for new mechanisms of accountability to ensure that States are accountable to their citizens. We also agree that the private sector should play a role in assuming responsibility for “turning good words into good deeds”. This remains the central challenge of the corporate responsibility movement around the world. “Good deeds” cannot just be those that suit the priorities

of a CEO or any one particular interest group, but “good deeds” need to represent the interests of a range of stakeholders and in particular the most marginalised and vulnerable in society.

We believe the Business Leaders Initiative on Human Rights is highlighting the “art of the possible”, demonstrating in a practical way how addressing issues through a human rights “lens” can be beneficial for business. We believe by exemplifying good practice in this area we can inspire others to make a positive impact.

Businesses need to work in partnership with governments to achieve sustainable international development goals. We believe governments and business, working in collaboration with civil society, can benefit from approaching development challenges within the framework of human rights. Human rights offer greater accountability in the delivery of social, economic, cultural, civil and political freedoms. As the Secretary General says, “when there is no accountability we will under-perform”.

The Business Leaders Initiative on Human Rights is very pleased that the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in April of this year called for the appointment by the Secretary General of a Special Representative to focus on the issue of business and human rights. This is a very positive development and represents an opportunity for governments, business, organised labour, NGOs and communities to work together to define a common understanding of the role business can and should play in respecting, protecting, and promoting human rights. It is very important to define more clearly what can reasonably be expected of business and we note that the concepts of “sphere of influence” and “complicity” have been explicitly mentioned in the mandate. The companies in our initiative offer our assistance to the Special Representative when appointed and to the Secretary General in this important work. We hope our joint report with the UN Global Compact, to be launched at the Global Compact meeting in Shanghai later this year, will contribute constructively to the Special Representative’s work and to the efforts of businesses around the world who want to contribute to sustainable development. In this report, we follow the schematic of a business management system and suggest ways in which any business might integrate human rights into specific business functions. We also make reference to the work of a growing number of experts, organisations and companies around the world working at the interface of business and human rights.

I would like to conclude by highlighting some key challenges that face us all if we want the private sector to be more engaged in human rights in the years ahead. The first is that the discussion has so far been dominated by large, multi-national companies, based in OECD countries, a small but growing

number that see human rights as a major priority for their operations and long term interests. We are reminded by the UN Millennium Project report that it is small and medium-sized businesses that provide the essential backbone for economic and social well-being. We need to be clear about how multinational companies can most effectively contribute to human rights in ways that also empower local business to do the same thereby alleviating poverty and injustice.

Second, it is easier perhaps to mark out an appropriate role for business in countries where governments are willing and able to fulfil their human rights commitments most of the time. When governments are unwilling or unable to do so, then the role of business becomes more important and the need to determine clear boundaries of business responsibility more urgent. We hope that as part of the proposed reform of the human rights architecture of the UN system, the General Assembly considers carefully the way in which the international community can guide companies to do the right thing; to avoid committing or becoming complicit in human rights abuses, while using their potential to relieve poverty and build sustainable economic growth under difficult circumstances.

When we look back at the preamble of the Universal Declaration and its call to “all organs of society” to play their role in promoting and protecting human rights, some may reasonably conclude that non-state actors such as the private sector have not always done enough to make a positive difference in making rights a reality for all. We have an opportunity now, as we mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN’s founding and seek to reform the organisation to meet today’s challenges, to reconsider the Universal Declaration’s call.

We wish the General Assembly good fortune in the important work ahead and we encourage business throughout the world to support the United Nations and its role in making development, security and human rights a reality for all people.

*End.*