

Press Release

Brussels, 20 June 2016

EU Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions on business and human rights: More decisive action needed on access to justice

[The European Coalition for Corporate Justice \(ECCJ\)](#), [CIDSE](#) and [Action Aid](#), welcome the Foreign Affairs Council's Conclusions on business and human rights, adopted 20 June 2016, and call for their rapid translation into practice.

The Dutch presidency had identified business and human rights as one of the key priorities for its mandate. The Conclusions reflect the Dutch presidency and EU Member States' acknowledgement that the measures taken so far to ensure that companies respect human rights and are accountable for violations, remain insufficient.

We appreciate the particular commitments made on transparency, corporate responsibility to protect human rights, and access to remedies. Attention is also given to the adoption of Action Plans at national and European level, peer review learning, and the necessity to ensure better policy coherence, including with regard to the EU's external activities.

The reference in the Conclusions to the need for better access to justice for victims of corporate abuse should be the starting point for a much more ambitious roadmap for the EU and Member States to address the legal and practical barriers faced by victims.

The urgency of action in this area was recently outlined in the [outcome](#) of the EU Roadmap Business and Human Rights Conference, jointly organised by the Dutch Government and civil society organisations, on 11 May 2016. While both the Council of Europe's recent [Recommendation on Human Rights and Business](#) and the [UN Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights](#) have also acknowledged this salient issue.

"Voluntary codes alone will not make companies accountable; government interventions are essential in an area as important as access to justice", comments Filip Gregor, ECCJ Steering Group Member. "The Conclusions are asking the European Commission to address the issue of access to remedies at legislative level. This is not only vital, but also urgent, if we want to bring justice to victims of abuse around the world."

In addition to ensuring effective access to remedies, the EU and Member States should also adopt legislation to require and monitor that companies respect human rights throughout their global operations and carry out human rights due diligence to discharge this obligation.

In this context, the political agreement reached last week on the EU Conflict Minerals Regulation is a [first limited step in the right direction](#), but it unfortunately exempts the vast majority of EU companies trading in minerals from the requirement to exercise due diligence when importing minerals from high-risks and conflict areas. The two-year review clause will thus be essential to assess its real benefits for populations suffering abuses near mining areas, and to strengthen its scope.

A stronger link between the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the UNGPs, as suggested in the Council Conclusions, is welcome – but not sufficient in isolation. Voluntary and non-binding initiatives must be backed by robust accountability mechanisms and binding rules for all.

The Conclusions also reference the need to further develop the international legal framework. The EU should translate this into action through constructive participation in the UN process to develop a legally binding instrument on business and human rights, to improve human rights protection and corporate responsibility all around the world.

“Beyond any declaration of good intentions and promises to seek improvement, what we need are ambitious actions leading to effective results,” concludes Filip Gregor. “In the 21st century, corporations must be responsible and accountable. Member States and the EU have obligation to create conditions that make this a reality and counterbalance the forces that drive a race to the bottom.”

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Note for journalists:

With 21 member groups, representing over 250 organisations from 15 countries, the **European Coalition for Corporate Justice (ECCJ)** is the only European coalition bringing together European campaigns and national platforms of NGOs, trade unions, consumer organisations and academics to promote corporate accountability.

CIDSE is an international family of Catholic social justice organisations, working together to promote justice, harness the power of global solidarity and create transformational change to end poverty, inequalities and threats to the environment both global and local.

Action Aid is an international organisation, working with over 15 million people in 45 countries for a world free from poverty and injustice.