



Statement by His Excellency Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, Permanent Observer of the
Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva
at the 23rd Session of the Human Rights Council
Item 3: Transnational Corporations and Human Rights
Geneva, 31 May 2013

Mr. President,

The urgency of the call to increased Corporate Social and Environmental Responsibility was elevated to a new pitch for all stakeholders when the news about the collapse of a garment factory on the outskirts of Dhaka on April 24th spread rapidly around the world. The loss of more than 1,100 young lives coupled with the untold pain of their relatives, and the suffering and crushed dreams of hundreds more is a reminder of corrective actions that need to be undertaken by all corporations that participate in a global supply chain process that relies continually on the contribution of workers. The images of that disaster are also a reminder of the interdependence that globalization has brought about in transnational economic activity.

Deeply moved by the tragic case of Dhaka, Pope Francis expressed his concern about conditions where “People are less important than the things that give profit to those who have political, social and economic power.” Pointing to the core issues that are often present in factory life today he said that “Not paying a just [wage], not providing work, focusing on statements, only looking at making personal profit, that goes against God!”, while describing the conditions in which the workers lost their lives as “slave labour”.¹

Numerous challenges have emerged throughout the evolution of industrialization and its attendant mass production processes over the last three hundred years. Governments, civil society, unions, shareholders and corporations sometimes cooperatively and at other times in adversity have worked to decrease the negative impacts of those realities. However still in our own day the number of human lives that are lost or severely crushed as a result of unsafe working conditions remains too great.

In recent years various initiatives have been undertaken by different stakeholders to address some of the remaining challenges that exist in the predominant supply chain business model that cuts across nearly all business sectors. They have successfully

¹Cfr. Homily of Pope Francis for the feast of St Joseph the Worker, in the Chapel of Domus Sanctae Marthae, on 1 May 2013 (cfr. L’Osservatore Romano, Thursday-Friday, 2nd-3rd May 2013, p. 6).

brought some level of scrutiny to the policies and more importantly the practices that needed to be changed. These stakeholders from both the public and private sectors from civil society and from the faith-based investment community deserve to be applauded for their achievements to protect human dignity, promote human rights and safeguard the environment.

As recently as 2009, in the encyclical “*Caritas in Veritate*”, Pope Benedict XVI reminded us all that “among those who sometimes fail to respect the human rights of workers are large multinational companies as well as local producers.” (#22) It remains important for all, therefore, to recognize labour standards as an integral and important part of corporate social responsibility. Freedom of association, the elimination of all forms of forced and compulsory labour, the abolition of child labour and the effective elimination of discrimination in employment and payment must be respected and enforced in all jurisdictions.

Another important aspect of the work that remains to be done in this arena is a complete and more deliberate consensus about the role and responsibility of corporations in society. While a great number of people and corporate leaders have successfully moved beyond the view that the maximization of profit is the sole reason and purpose for corporations, the support and adoption of the legal framework that can serve as a foundation for this new vision is still in its infancy. The search for a consensus that will provide the desirable balance between the role and responsibility of governments and the public sector and at the same time the space for private corporations to make their valuable contributions to the common good continues. We must sustain our commitment to that search and allow it to produce appropriate and different but clear solutions for the varying situations, cultures and regions that exist across the world.

The endorsement by the UN Human Rights Council in June 2011 of the “Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations Protect, Respect, and Remedy Framework” was an important milestone. It was followed in November 2011 by the release of “The Corporate Responsibility to Respect Human Rights: An interpretive Guide” by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Thus, the commitment to implementation became evident. The foundational platform that calls states to protect, corporations to respect and all stakeholders to remedy past abuses of human rights is both clear and welcome.

The collaborative and inclusive process that led to the adoption of these important policies by the United Nations was a clear indication that all stakeholders, some of whom previously had been on opposite sides in the many debates related to the issues addressed in these commitments, were ready to both embrace the social commitment of corporations and ready to create the tools and mechanisms that would facilitate the fulfillment of such responsibilities. The ongoing commitments by different stakeholders to the due diligence that is integral to the promotion of human rights are making an important contribution to the strategic work that is now being accomplished.

Corporate Social Responsibility is not only necessary because both international organizations and public opinion are increasingly demanding that private companies take a greater role in promoting well-being wherever they operate but also because it is an issue of social justice.

The Holy See takes this opportunity to recall the responsibility of transnational corporations and other business enterprises to respect human rights. Proper regulation can contribute to the promotion of and respect for human rights and to the common good of all. Every business, regardless of its size or number of employees, where it has been established in the country of installation or operation, should support, respect and protect internationally proclaimed human rights within their sphere of influence.

Greater transparency by all corporations is also needed so that all stakeholders have the information required to make well-founded judgments about the ways in which human rights are respected and protected. Consumers also will benefit from increased transparency and be in a better position to make informed judgments about their purchasing choices. In that way they can reward companies that are proactive in respecting human rights and avoid those who only give lip service to that priority. Better certifications and international standards can also help to address this global challenge by establishing a clear benchmark and framework for monitoring those who respect human rights and social corporate responsibility.

In conclusion, Mr. President, with the images of the factory collapse in Bangladesh still before the eyes of the world, we wish to make a special appeal for the establishment, promotion and exchange of good and innovative practices gleaned from a wide variety of actors, in both the public and private sectors, so that a more robust respect for human rights will become a priority for all corporations. The achievement of these goals will benefit people everywhere and support the universal common good. Responsible business practices that respect human rights and protect the environment will support a more sustainable and inclusive economy.

Thank you, Mr. President.