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## HUMAN RIGHTS IN MOTION: A MAP TO A MOVEMENT'S FUTURE

Lucia Nader (Executive Director, Conectas) Juana Kweitel (Program Director, Conectas) Marcos Fuchs (Associate Director, Conectas)

Sur Journal was created ten years ago as a vehicle to deepen and strengthen bonds between academics and activists from the Global South concerned with human rights, in order to magnify their voices and their participation before international organizations and academia. Our main motivation was the fact that, particularly in the Southern hemisphere, academics were working alone and there was very little exchange between researchers from different countries. The journal's aim has been to provide individuals and organizations working to defend human rights with research, analyses and case studies that combine academic rigor and practical interest. In many ways, these lofty ambitions have been met with success: in the past decade, we have published articles from dozens of countries on issues as diverse as health and access to treatment, transitional justice, regional mechanisms and information and human rights, to name a few. Published in three languages and available online and in print for free, our project also remains unique in terms of geographical reach, critical perspective and its Southern 'accent'. In honour of the founding editor of this journal, Pedro Paulo Poppovic, the 20th issue

opens with a biography (by João Paulo Charleaux) of this sociologist who has been one of the main contributors to this publication's success.

This past decade has also been, in many ways, a successful one for the human rights movement as a whole. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has recently turned 60, new international treaties have been adopted and the old but good global and regional monitoring systems are in full operation, despite criticisms regarding their effectiveness and attempts by States to curb their authority. From a strategic perspective, we continue to use, with more or less success, advocacy, litigation and naming-and-shaming as our main tools for change. In addition, we continue to nurture partnerships between what we categorize as local, national and international organizations within our movement.

Nevertheless, the political and geographic coordinates under which the global human rights movement has operated have undergone profound changes. Over the past decade, we have witnessed hundreds of thousands of people take to the streets to protest against social and political injustices. We have also seen emerging powers from the South play an increasingly influential

role in the definition of the global human rights agenda. Additionally, the past ten years have seen the rapid growth of social networks as a tool of mobilization and as a privileged forum for sharing political information between users. In other words, the journal is publishing its 20th issue against a backdrop that is very different from that of ten years ago. The protests that recently filled the streets of many countries around the globe, for example, were not organized by traditional social movements nor by unions or human rights NGOs, and people's grievances, more often than not, were expressed in terms of social justice and not as rights. Does this mean that human rights are no longer seen as an effective language for producing social change? Or that human rights organizations have lost some of their ability to represent wronged citizens? Emerging powers themselves, despite their newly-acquired international influence, have hardly been able - or willing - to assume stances departing greatly from those of "traditional" powers. How and where can human rights organizations advocate for change? Are Southern-based NGOs in a privileged position to do this? Are NGOs from emerging powers also gaining influence in international forums?

It was precisely to reflect upon these and other pressing issues that, for this 20<sup>th</sup> issue, SUR's editors decided to enlist the help of over 50 leading human rights activists and academics from 18 countries, from Ecuador to Nepal, from China to the US. We asked them to ponder on what we saw as some of the most urgent and relevant questions facing the global human rights movement today: 1. Who do we represent? 2. How do we combine urgent issues with long-term impacts? 3. Are human rights still an effective language for producing social change? 4. How have new information and communication technologies influenced activism? 5. What are the challenges of working internationally from the South?

The result, which you now hold in your hands, is a roadmap for the global human rights movement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – it offers a vantage point from which it is possible to observe where the movement stands today and where it is heading. The first stop is a reflection on these issues by the founding

directors of Conectas Human Rights, Oscar Vilhena Vieira and Malak El-Chichini Poppovic. The roadmap then goes on to include interviews and articles, both providing in-depth analyses of human rights issues, as well as notes from the field, more personalized accounts of experiences working with human rights, which we have organized into six categories, although most of them could arguably be allocated to more than one category:

Language. In this section, we have included articles that ponder the question of whether human rights - as a utopia, as norms and as institutions - are still effective for producing social change. Here, the contributions range from analyses on human rights as a language for change (Stephen Hopgood and Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro), empirical research on the use of the language of human rights for articulating grievances in recent mass protests (Sara Burke), to reflections on the standard-setting role and effectiveness of international human rights institutions (Raquel Rolnik, Vinodh Jaichand and Emílio Álvarez Icaza). It also includes studies on the movement's global trends (David Petrasek), challenges to the movement's emphasis on protecting the rule of law (Kumi Naidoo), and strategic proposals to better ensure a compromise between utopianism and realism in relation to human rights (Samuel Moyn).

Themes. Here we have included contributions that address specific human rights topics from an original and critical standpoint. Four themes were analysed: economic power and corporate accountability for human rights violations (Phil Bloomer, Janet Love and Gonzalo Berrón); sexual politics and LGBTI rights (Sonia Corrêa, Gloria Careaga Pérez and Arvind Narrain); migration (Diego Lorente Pérez de Eulate); and, finally, transitional justice (Clara Sandoval).

Perspectives. This section encompasses country-specific accounts, mostly field notes from human rights activists on the ground. Those contributions come from places as diverse as Angola (Maria Lúcia da Silveira), Brazil (Ana Valéria Araújo), Cuba (María-Ileana Faguaga Iglesias), Indonesia (Haris Azhar), Mozambique (Salvador Nkamate) and Nepal (Mandira Sharma). But they all share a critical perspective on human rights, including

for instance a sceptical perspective on the relation between litigation and public opinion in Southern Africa (Nicole Fritz), a provocative view of the democratic future of China and its relation to labour rights (Han Dongfang), and a thoughtful analysis of the North-South duality from Northern Ireland (Maggie Beirne).

Voices. Here the articles go to the core of the question of whom the global human rights movement represents. Adrian Gurza Lavalle and Juana Kweitel take note of the pluralisation of representation and innovative forms of accountability adopted by human rights NGOs. Others study the pressure for more representation or a louder voice in international human rights mechanisms (such as in the Inter-American system, as reported by Mario Melo) and in representative institutions such as national legislatures (as analysed by Pedro Abramovay and Heloisa Griggs). Finally, Chris Grove, as well as James Ron, David Crow and Shannon Golden emphasize, in their contributions, the need for a link between human rights NGOs and grassroots groups, including economically disadvantaged populations. As a counter-argument, Fateh Azzam questions the need of human rights activists to represent anyone, taking issue with the critique of NGOs as being overly dependent on donors. Finally, Mary Lawlor and Andrew Anderson provide an account of a Northern organization's efforts to attend to the needs of local human rights defenders as they, and only they, define them.

Tools. In this section, the editors included contributions that focus on the instruments used by the global human rights movement to do its work. This includes a debate on the role of technology in promoting change (Mallika Dutt and Nadia Rasul, as well as Sopheap Chak and Miguel Pulido Jiménez) and perspectives on the challenges of human rights campaigning, analysed provocatively by Martin Kirk and Fernand Alphen in their respective contributions. Other articles point to the need of organizations to be more grounded in local contexts, as noted by Ana Paula Hernández in relation to Mexico, by Louis Bickford in what he sees as a convergence towards the global middle, and finally by Rochelle Jones, Sarah Rosenhek and

Anna Turley in their movement-support model. In addition, it is noted by Mary Kaldor that NGOs are not the same as civil society, properly understood. Furthermore, litigation and international work are cast in a critical light by Sandra Carvalho and Eduardo Baker in relation to the dilemma between long and short term strategies in the Inter-American system. Finally, Gastón Chillier and Pétalla Brandão Timo analyse South-South cooperation from the viewpoint of a national human rights NGO in Argentina.

Multipolarity. Here, the articles challenge our ways of thinking about power in the multipolar world we currently live in, with contributions from the heads of some of the world's largest international human rights organizations based in the North (Kenneth Roth and Salil Shetty) and in the South (Lucia Nader, César Rodríguez-Garavito, Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah and Mandeep Tiwana). This section also debates what multipolarity means in relation to States (Emilie M. Hafner-Burton), international organizations and civil society (Louise Arbour) and businesses (Mark Malloch-Brown).

Conectas hopes this issue will foster debate on the future of the global human rights movement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, enabling it to reinvent itself as necessary to offer better protection of human rights on the ground.

Conectas Human Rights is especially grateful for the collaboration of the authors and support of Conectas' team, in special Laura Daudén, João Brito and Laura Waisbich. We would also like to extend our appreciation for the work of Maria Brant and Manoela Miklos for conceiving this Issue and for conducting most of the interviews, and for Thiago Amparo for joining the editorial team and making this Issue possible. Last, but not least, we are also immensely thankful for Luz González's relentless work editing the contributions received, and for Ana Cernov for coordinating the overall editorial. Thanks to all!



#### JANET LOVE

Janet Love has been the National Director of the Legal Resources Centre (LRC) since January 2006 and a Commissioner on the South African Human Rights Commission since 2009. She has been an anti-apartheid activist since 1974 and was involved in the Trade Union movement and the African National Congress prior to and during the 10 years she spent in exile. She has studied at both the University of the Witwatersrand and of London and has post-graduate

qualifications in public administration, development management and economics.

#### **ABSTRACT**

This article focuses on the international debate on business and human rights, in order to scrutinize whether the human rights language that is currently used is able to produce social change by remedying economic injustices. The author criticizes the current international guidelines in this area for their failure to result in greater business accountability in practice; the absence of remedy, restitution and reparation for victims and, in particular, the lack of state sanction; and the non-recognition of businesses as social actors with power which ought to be associated with primary human rights duties rather than voluntary good conduct. As a consequence, the author outlines some of the alternatives and/or additional mechanisms sought by human rights defenders and some states to deal with the tremendous growth in economic inequality, including recent proposals of a binding treaty. The author concludes the article with questions for the future of human rights defenders' work with business and human rights.

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#### **KEYWORDS**

 $Economic\ injustice-United\ Nations-African\ Commission-Business\ and\ human\ rights$ 

- Ruggie



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#### **ESSAY**

# ARE WE DEPOLITICISING ECONOMIC POWER?: WILFUL BUSINESS IRRESPONSIBILITY AND BUREAUCRATIC RESPONSE BY HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Janet Love

The question of engaging business is clearly an issue that dominates the work of human rights organisations from the global south. Less clear is what some of the key issues that relate to this front of struggle involves. This article seeks to raise some of those issues, having especially in mind the international debate on standard setting in the area of business and human rights. Ultimately, this article scrutinizes whether human rights language, as used until now in this international debate, is able to produce social change by remedying current economic injustices.

To be clear, human rights defenders have a crucial role to play in promoting corporate respect for and realisation of human rights, including in exposing and seeking remedy for corporate human rights violations. Despite this, there is a worsening response from State and non-State actors that includes threats to forbid and/or restrict the work of civil society organizations (CSOs), failure to respect the rule of law and abide by court decisions, and threats and attacks against defenders who work on issues of business and human rights. With this scenario in mind, this article firstly sketches the international and regional framework regarding business and human rights. Secondly, it briefly outlines some of the challenges faced by human rights defenders in fighting against economic injustice. Finally, it reveals some of the alternatives proposed by human rights defenders and states to increase accountability of business.

## 1 International and regional human rights framework

the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) state that they apply to all business enterprises, including trans-nationals, "regardless of their size, sector, location, ownership and structure" (UNITED NATIONS, 2011,

principle 14). Yet the focus is to create a positive obligation on States – rather than on business – to implement those principles in a manner that pays attention to the rights and needs of individuals or groups that are at heightened risk of becoming vulnerable or marginalised due to business conduct. It urges businesses to avoid infringing on human rights as articulated in international law and to address adverse human rights impacts that they may be involved in. At no point is there any sense of clear obligation with possible sanction that is placed on business. And it is not as though international mechanisms are without possibilities to exercise sanctions against businesses as has been clearly demonstrated, for example, through the actions and decisions taken by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and by financial institutions as part of the 'global war against terror'.

The UNGPs recognise that businesses should consult with human rights defenders about the design and impact of projects. They also recognise that businesses should ensure that 'the legitimate and peaceful activities of human rights defenders are not obstructed' (UNITED NATIONS, 2011, commentary to principle 26).

The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) adopted a resolution in 2012 (THE AFRICAN COMMISSION ON HUMAN AND PEOPLES' RIGHTS, ACHPR/Res. 224, 2012), emphasising the impact of human rights abuses on the rural communities in Africa and called for maximum and effective participation of local communities in the development on their land. In 2013, the ACHPR also adopted a resolution (THE AFRICAN COMMISSION ON HUMAN AND PEOPLES' RIGHTS, 2013), noting in its preamble that illicit capital flight from Africa "leads to the loss of billions of US dollars every year" and called for a study on the impact of illicit capital flight on human rights in Africa.

Notwithstanding this, social conflicts involving the oil, gas and mining (or extractives) industries have led to calls by ACHPR – and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR) – for interventions by government; but there appears to have been little or no effort to bring pressure to bear on businesses to fulfil their obligations (COLLINS; FLEISCHMAN, 2013). Instead, international discourse on business and human rights has focused primarily on understanding the obstacles that prevent victims from securing an effective remedy, rather than on removing such obstacles (AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, 2014). The defenders of these communities against rights abuses are particularly vulnerable. In many instances, where victims have attempted to make use of both judicial and non-judicial mechanisms in seeking an effective remedy, they remain unsuccessful and, consequently, continue to suffer the abuse. Furthermore, the time that lapses results in access to a remedy becoming less likely.

## 2 Human rights defenders and economic power

The experiences of human rights defenders working on business and human rights and the obligations to promote and realize rights both by State and non-State actors, and the reports from international NGOs and UN experts, point to a worsening of abuses against them, increasing difficulties for their operations and increases in restrictions and reprisals against them.

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These human rights defenders are framing issues within a rights context highlighting the disparities in access to justice, agency and voice. This disparity is brought about primarily through the increasing gap between rich and poor. The question of the extent to which human rights defenders can and/or should frame and situate human rights struggles as part of the struggles around the structures of economic power is something that needs further discussion. The current discourse around human rights and democracy enables broad alliances and does not necessarily require clarity about what would constitute economic justice and how this could come about. It thereby often fails to provide a basis for engagement by activists or to constitute a rallying call that encourages people to hope for an end to the disparities.

For example, mining has historically been the mainstay of the South African economy and has shaped both its social and environmental fabric. The urban and industrial landscape has been dramatically influenced according to the location of minerals. The mining industry remains important to the economy and has a critical role to play in supporting the aspirations of development and growth. However, notwithstanding the advent of democracy 20 years ago, in this period the sector has not only had negative impacts on the environment, but is also notorious for unequal, seemingly sacrosanct practices that have resulted in human rights violations (of communities and employees) and in the loss of lives. Instead of contributing to broad economic empowerment especially of the directly involved and affected workers and communities, it has enriched very few individuals.

Land ownership in South Africa has long been a source of conflict. Its history of conquest and dispossession, of forced removals and a racially skewed distribution, has left it with a complex and difficult legacy. Currently, the South African Government is obliged by the country's Constitution to implement land reform processes and enact and implement legislation to realise "the nation's commitment to land reform and to reforms to bring about equitable access to all South Africa's natural resources" (SOUTH AFRICA, 1996, Section 25(4)). A number of laws placing obligations on business to ensure sustainable environmental management, full participation in transparent planning processes by affected communities and safe, fair working conditions have been enacted. Companies fail to comply and the South African government fails to enforce. All of this has a direct bearing on issues pertaining to business and the economy and relate to the extent to which business actors perceive themselves as being primary 'duty bearers' as a consequence of their power. Very often business hides behind the absence of effective enforcement by the State for its failures but arguments of this nature appear predicated on the view that the problem lies not in the violation but only if and in being caught.

Generally, transnational corporations generate and provide foreign direct investment to the host State. This frequently results in businesses exerting an inordinate amount of influence on public policy thereby influencing the independent decision-making authority of the State. Often host countries lack the capacity for effectively dealing with these issues. In addition, the impact of business involvement in public policy is seldom transparent and therefore creates

an environment where companies are not held accountable for the human rights impact of subsequent economic policy choices. The lack of transparency and accountability measures contributes to the growth of corruption and impunity which, in turn, undermine the very fabric of democracy and human rights.

The potential impact of the State's relationship on transnational corporations is mainly viewed on the basis of the location of the company's domicile. However, the activities of companies, based throughout Africa, yet domiciled in South Africa, reveal that such companies opportunistically take advantage of undemocratic, weak regimes to further burden poor and oppressed people in these countries. Currently, there are no extraterritorial mechanisms in place to hold these companies accountable for human rights abuses perpetrated in such host countries<sup>1</sup>.

Coupled with this, corporate legal principles such as 'separate legal personality', which effectively separate the legal personalities between parent companies (often situated in the Global North) and their subsidiaries (situated in the Global South), means that parent companies will not be held liable for violations caused by their subsidiaries despite amassing significant profits from their conduct. This becomes of grave concern when victims are unable to prosecute subsidiaries in their own jurisdiction due to weak judicial mechanisms governing their countries.

(INTERNATIONAL COORDINATING COMMITTEE OF NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS INSTITUTIONS' WORKING GROUP OF BUSINESS AND HUMAN RIGHTS, 2014).

Notwithstanding the willingness with which businesses are comfortable to capitalise on their status as having 'separate legal personality' when it comes to accountability and tax avoidance, it is virtually impossible to engage either States or businesses about the duties that go with legal personality and, in particular, creating opportunities to pursue criminal liability charges and claims against business through international criminal court mechanisms in the event that local remedies are exhausted or unavailable.

While the UNGPs assert that States are neither required nor prohibited to regulate extraterritorial activities of businesses, it also recognises that the extraterritorial state duty to protect remains unsettled in international law (BILCHITZ, 2013). Although victims may have had access to legal avenues which allow for civil claims such as the Alien Tort Claims Act (ATCA) of the United States, the recent judgment of *Kiobel v. Royal Dutch Petroleum Co.* (UNITED STATES, 2013) that effectively restricts the application of the ATCA in cases involving allegations of abuse outside of the jurisdiction of the United States, is a setback for holding businesses that are either directly or indirectly complicit in the commission of human rights violations accountable.

## 3 Searching for alternatives

the failure of the UNGPs to result in greater business accountability in practice - notwithstanding the fact that they have been picked up in various plans and

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agreements (RUGGIE, 2014); the absence of remedy, restitution, reparation for victims and, in particular, the lack of State sanction; and the non-recognition of businesses as social actors with power which ought to be associated with primary human rights duties rather than voluntary good conduct – are the key drivers of the search for alternatives and/or additional mechanisms and for finding other approaches to deal with what is seen as having driven the tremendous growth in inequality.

It is in this context that a number of developing countries have given their support to calls within the United National Human Rights Council (UNHRC) for the development of a binding treaty to hold businesses accountable for human rights violations at an international level. During its June 2014 session in Geneva, the UNHRC adopted three resolutions around business and human rights. One resolution (UNITED NATIONS, 2014a), led by Norway, Argentina, Ghana and Russia, focuses on national implementation of the UNGPs, renewing the mandate or the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights. That resolution was adopted by consensus. In addition there was a further consensus decision to extend the mandate of the Expert Working Group which the Council established in 2011 to promote and build on the UNGPs, and it requests the High Commissioner for Human Rights to facilitate a consultative process with states, experts and other stakeholders to explore "the full range of legal options and practical measures to improve access to remedy for victims of business-related human rights abuses" (UNITED NATIONS, 2014a, para. 7).

The other resolution (UNITED NATIONS, 2014b), led by Ecuador and co-sponsored by Bolivia, Cuba, South Africa and Venezuela, establishes an inter-governmental process to begin the development of a treaty 'to regulate, in international human rights law, the activities of transnational corporations and other business enterprises'. The resolution was adopted by 20 votes (including a majority of African members and China, India, and Russia) to 14, with 13 abstentions. Apart from the co-sponsors, other Latin American countries, notably Brazil, abstained. The EU and the US indicated that they will not participate in the treaty negotiating process. Critics of this resolution are quick to characterise it as neither innovative nor constructive because of 'being divisive'.

The implicit assumption that innovation and/or consensus have constituted motive forces of the work of the UNHRC is highly questionable.<sup>2</sup> However there are a number of issues and concerns with this resolution. Negotiations are expected to convene sometime next year but the resolution does not stipulate any timeframes and stipulates a wide mandate with a very varied range of actors and activities that consequently is unlikely to realise its objective of a formulating a single, binding treaty. The fact that the US and the EU have excluded themselves is a concern – but not surprising given the nexus of political and financial power that resides in these jurisdictions. On the other hand, knowing that China and Russia are on board does not suggest any certainty that the debate will be robust or that the outcome will advance even discreet instruments to address particularly egregious violations by business – let alone that with their presence there will be progress towards a wider legislative framework.

In the debate, there were suggestions that business is somehow open only to the force of national legislation and 'rule of law'. Why this should be the case any more than migration or trade and investment, for example, is not clear as noted by Ruggie:

But if national law and domestic courts sufficed, then why do TNCs [transnational corporations] not rely on them to resolve investment disputes with states? Why is binding international arbitration necessary, enabled by 3,000 bilateral investment treaties and investment chapters in free trade agreements? The justification for this has always been that national laws and domestic courts are not adequate and need to be supplemented by international instruments.

(RUGGIE, 2014).

However, they are mainly the motive force behind the importance of generating further scope for debate.

Issues relating to State procurement processes also highlight the problems of non-competitive behaviour and collusion (in addition to violation of environmental, health and other rights) which, at times, are domestic but in the case of large-scale developments (arms deals; nuclear power facilities; fracking) and mega-events (such as FIFA World Cup) are replicated in different parts of the world and involve transnational business interests. Clearly the arena of 'social safeguards' and 'social licence to operate' relate to investment decisions and related risk. The problem in the context of democracy and human rights that surrounds much of State procurement does not only relate to corruption in government but also to the rampant greed and individual enrichment that occurs benefitting those in business at the expense of the taxpayers and to the detriment of those most vulnerable and marginalised in society.

The potential and actual involvement of business in the abuse of its power to the detriment of human rights is undeniable - and yet it is not met with a response that is able to relate to this power within a political discourse without being cast into the realm of polemics. The direct involvement of business in slavery and forced labour generate public outcry often without any action being taken by either the State or civil society. Areas of private security and the production, distribution and use of mass surveillance equipment are areas of non-State actor power wielded by business, which can be and are used in direct violation of human rights of citizens and, in many instances, are used in trans-boundary interventions. From a consumer perspective, the destructive impact of the financial sector in promoting reckless lending and spending is part of a number of violations that have been widely documented - such as Nestle products that relate to baby food – and a range of ways in which health rights and food security is undermined by producers has received attention such as in relation to intellectual property rights and the pharmaceutical industry. In this regard, the absence of human rights engagement with and by those involved in the negotiations around trade and investment such as the WTO is clearly a problem.

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#### 4 Conclusion

Human rights defenders who engage around issues of business and human rights in the global arena have tended to place primary emphasis on engaging around the questions of human rights and business in a manner that places undue emphasis on legislative instruments including "hard" and "soft" law. While there is recognition and use of other tools – including social movement mobilisation such as 'Occupy Wall Street', boycotts of products and naming-and-shaming – business and human rights constitutes our soft underbelly. Our thinking lacks coherence and strategy. We are reliant on old concepts of business which have not been renewed within the framework of today. For example, social media is one part of the current reality that has challenged the structure of industrial relations organisation and bargaining and there are huge questions around the future of these mechanisms which have long provided a focus and a basis for the mobilisation of workers into unions. Add to this, the complexity of a rapidly changing 'world of work' and the related challenges for inclusion of the 'informal sector' and the realisation of the right to work. The legislative instruments represent an opportunity to formalise and create some degree of certainty: false comfort when it is about a mercurial socio-economic and political realm.

Engaging around policy, convention, agreement and domestic legislation is clearly something that human rights organisations like the LRC are involved with both nationality and beyond their borders. But a number of questions arise when focusing on the issues relating to business and human rights which are less certain:

- 1. Tackling a business in one jurisdiction: does it have automatic impact on related businesses in the sector and/or parts of the same company elsewhere? Is it necessary for any broader impact to involve similar actions being mounted in other jurisdictions?
- 2. To what extent does the interplay and interconnectedness of state power and business need to become the focus of actions by human rights civil society organisations? How can issues of transparency and accountability that arise in one jurisdiction be tackled from another vantage point?
- 3. How do human rights organisations move the battles waged against human rights violations perpetrated by business from the level of elite/boardroom to popular movement/street mobilisation? Without the latter, the impact is destined to be stunted.

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