

ON BEHALF OF THE  
**HUMAN DIGNITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS CAUCUS**

Press release

**Human rights accountability and the environment**

**Bringing the World Social Forum to Davos: The Human Dignity and Human Rights Caucus demands that States and Corporations close human rights accountability gaps**

**Davos, 22. January 2008:** “Today many victims of human rights violations do not know where to claim their rights, or whom to hold accountable for their suffering”, says Ms. Souhayr Belhassen, the President of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), describing the human rights reality in many countries. “In Davos, during the World Economic Forum, we must raise our awareness of the growing world-wide human rights accountability gaps”.

On the occasion of the World Social Forum Global Day of Action 2008, the Human Dignity and Human Rights Caucus (HDHRC), a global coalition of major human rights and development organizations, demanded that states and corporations put an end to global human rights violations. Poor people, in particular, suffer a dramatic increase in violations of their basic human rights. Marginalized people in rural areas are confronted with persistent inability to realize their rights to land, water, seeds and social services. They are often victims of forced eviction, as their land is used for large development infrastructures or for resource extraction. In many countries, the increasing conflicts and militarization are making a culture of impunity a daily reality. We are seeing a rapid surge of internally displaced persons, migrant workers, refugees and all groups confronted with citizenship gaps. Women are affected the most.

As the World Economic Forum 2008 devotes considerable attention to environmental issues, the Caucus highlights the relevance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the current debate over climate change, toxic waste and energy. Environmental damages directly threaten the right to life, to health, to water, to development, to housing, to work, to culture and the rights of indigenous people. Affected populations have the right to be protected from adverse environmental impacts, such as polluted water, soil and air, deforestation, and displacements that result from desertification or floods caused by climate change.

States have the legal obligation to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights written in treaties and in customary law. Although states are accountable to harmonize public policies and national laws with their obligations, they are often ineffective or complicit in human rights violations. Non-state actors also have human rights responsibilities. An increasing number of private actors are committing human rights violations. These actors include private security firms, armed rebellion and paramilitary groups, as well as transnational corporations. They extract, pollute and destroy scarce environmental resources and operate with poor labor standards. International Organizations too can have negative impacts on human rights. They prescribe economic policies to governments that contravene their human rights commitments, introduce private land markets, encourage privatization of water sources, enforce high health services fees and finance large development infrastructures. As non-state actors become more influential, their potential impacts on human rights increase.

“Human rights accountability today must not only pertain to state obligations,” says Michael Windfuhr, Human Rights Director of Bread for the World, a Protestant Church-based development organization in Germany. “Human rights accountability must be shared by all parties, whose actions affect human rights. Such parties include international financial institutions, the United Nations, multilateral agencies, private and public companies, influential foreign governments, local private interests, civil society organizations and individuals.” In fact, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) – which is celebrating its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year - affirms that “every individual and every organ of society” bears the responsibility “to promote respect for these rights and freedoms by progressive measures, national and international”.