

Holding corporations accountable when violating human and environmental rights

Dr. Kumi Naidoo

Greenpeace International

First of all, I would like to thank everyone who took part in the Public Eye voting process, this award is about you. About the role you played in being the defending voice of human rights and environmental justice. The Public Eye Awards is a platform for communicating to the business leaders gathered here at Davos that the talks should not be all about profits; human and environmental rights are a crucial part of the equation for good business practice.

The role corporations are playing in dictating and influencing governments is ever growing. Just recently, we saw the influence of corporations on political negotiations; I am of course referring to the 17th COP in my hometown of Durban, South Africa. The climate talks in Durban ended the same way they began- in failure.

Governments at the UN climate talks chose to listen to the polluters over the people, failed to reinforce previous climate saving measures and have steered clear of new global rules for tackling climate change. To demonstrate what I am talking about, let me give you an alarming figure... In the United States, for every congressman or congresswoman, there are four full time lobbyists paid by the fossil fuel industry, lobbying against any legislation that threaten to put a hole in the pockets of shareholders or CEOs. Those companies won in Durban, by making sure their government blocks any progress in the negotiations that can save guard our planet for the future of our children and grand children.

Another point that I would like to make is that in today's economy, many companies are even richer than sovereign countries, and we sadly know, that with money comes power. To just give you a hint of what am I talking about, For example;

- McDonald's makes just a little bit more money than Latvia! The world's largest fast food chain revenue is \$24.07 billion while Latvia's GDP: \$24.05 billion
- eBay is richer than Madagascar – eBay's revenue: \$9.16 billion while Madagascar's GDP: \$8.35 billion
- Nike makes more money than Paraguay! Nike's revenue: \$19.16 billion while Paraguay's GDP: \$18.48 billion
- Morgan Stanley's, the famous investment bankers revenue: \$39.32 billion Uzbekistan's GDP: \$38.99 billion
- Amazon.com's revenue is \$34.2 billion while Kenya's GDP: \$32.16 billion
- And its not only the developing world, GE's Revenue is almost 15 billion dollars more than New Zealand... \$151.63 billion for GE and New Zealand's GDP: \$140.43 billion

This is just to make you see what I am referring to when I say that corporations are getting more and more powerful, more powerful even than some governments. But also, with money comes responsibility, and that's why I truly believe that the Public Eye Awards can play a crucial role in holding companies accountable and responsible for their actions. Using public opinion and the media, we can show the world which companies need to illuminate their bad and harmful behavior, and get their act together.

Public Eye is our chance to show corporate leaders, who are sitting very close to us right now in Davos, that humankind and the environment have a voice too, and that we are a voice that will not be silenced.

I thank you again for taking part in this awards. I would also like to thank all the NGOs and members of civil society that submitted their nominations to the Awards. This year's short list presents the six most scandalous cases:

The British banking giant Barclays:

Barclays is the world's fourth-largest bank and arguably the fastest-growing food speculator worldwide. It drives up global food prices at the expense of the poorest. In just the second half of 2010, 44 million people worldwide were driven into extreme poverty due to rising food prices – and women in the Global South are often the hardest hit. Barclays enjoys close ties to the British government, which is threatening to block European regulation that would curb food speculation.

Also in the running is U.S. mining corporation Freeport McMoRan:

From its base in Arizona, Freeport McMoRan has operated the Grasberg Mine – the world's largest gold and copper mine – in West Papua for 45 years without regard for nature or people. The mine produces 230,000 tons of tailings contaminated with heavy metals every day, resulting in a blanket of waste rock with a radius of up to 10 kilometres (6.2 miles) and up to 15 meters (50 feet) deep that kills everything in its path, and threatens a World Heritage site.

Samsung: South Korea's largest conglomerate is nominated for using banned and highly-toxic substances in its factories without informing or protecting its workers. As a result, at least 140 workers were diagnosed with cancer, of which at least 50 young workers have died. Despite clear evidence, Samsung denies its responsibility and publicly discredits the sick and deceased, as well as their relatives.

Against its better judgment, Tepco:

Japan's largest energy company, grossly neglected the structural safety of its atomic power plants in order to cut costs. The meltdown at Fukushima and the resulting radioactive contamination of people, land and sea could have been prevented. The company also provided information that was verifiably false or very late in coming. A culture of favours, cover-ups and falsifications reigns at Tepco.

Vale: The fifth nominee is Brazil's second-largest corporation, the world's second-largest mining firm, and the largest global producer of iron ore. The corporation has a 60-year history tarnished by repeated human rights abuses, inhumane working conditions and the ruthless exploitation of nature. Vale is currently taking part in the construction of the Belo Monte Dam in the Amazon. The dam is likely to result in the forced relocation of 40,000 people, who have neither a voice in the matter nor will they likely receive compensation. An area the size of Switzerland's Lake Constance would be flooded, with disastrous consequences for the indigenous population as well as flora and fauna.

Last but not least, Swiss agrochemical and seed producer **Syngenta:** Continues to aggressively market its highly-toxic Paraquat herbicide, which harms the people in the Global South. Countless farmers have died after applying Paraquat on their fields or have been gravely poisoned. Syngenta's Atrazine pesticide has contaminated 90% of drinking water in the U.S. Midwest. The corporation conducted a smear campaign against a scientist critical of Atrazine, and attempted to buy his silence.

Citizens are no longer silenced against corporate greed; in many parts of the world, citizens are saying enough is enough. Corporation's greed and hunger for financial gains are influencing world democracies; governments need to stop listening to the polluters and start listening to their citizens... Whether we say enough is enough on square, on the streets, at home to our families, in our schools Or online, collectively our voices will reach the business and world leaders in platforms like the WEF. Today, the world will know which corporation has been elected by the Public Eye jury as the biggest violator of human and environmental rights.