

Closing Remarks of the
United Nations Resident Coordinator in Ethiopia, Eugene Owusu
on the occasion of the
Closing Plenary of the African Regional Forum on Business and Human Rights
18 September 2014, 12:00 – 13:00
ECA, Conference Room 2

Thank you for inviting to me the closing session of this very important Forum.

The discussions during this Forum have been wide-ranging, stretching from challenges and opportunities in the extractives sector to the protection of human rights in the context of land acquisitions. The discussions have been lively, animated, and filled with new ideas and options concerning the important role of business in supporting human rights in Africa.

I will not attempt to summarize these rich discussions in a few minutes – I simply could not do it justice.

I also think that as we close this important conference, we not only look back over the last few days, but, more importantly, chart a way forward that takes these discussion and turns words into concrete strategies and action plans at the regional and national levels that respond to the specific regional challenges you have discussed.

The rapid growth that many African economies are experiencing hold great promise, but also demands heightened attention to the risks that such growth can entail. Strategies for advancing the business and human rights agenda in Africa should enable economic growth to be coupled with adequate safeguards to ensure that it contributes to human dignity and the realization of rights for all.

The Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, endorsed by the Human Rights Council in June 2011, responds to a demand expressed by people across the globe that human dignity should be at the centre of economic development. They demand accountability from States and businesses to the rights-holders. But the Guiding Principles are also a tool that can help unlock the positive impacts of economic growth on human rights -- through supporting decent jobs; services that are enabling and inclusive; innovations in health and education;

and expanding access to finance -- by ensuring that risks are identified and dealt with at an early stage.

The Guiding Principles offer practical and concrete guidance on a number of levels. They offer guidance to States on how to protect human rights in the context of economic activities. They offer guidance to business to ensure that they respect human rights wherever they operate. And they offer guidance to both States and business to ensure that victims have access to effective remedies where infringements take place.

But the Guiding Principles are words on paper, as powerful as they are. They are only effective insofar as they are implemented on the ground, and the discussions during the past few days have demonstrated the urgency of scaling up implementation.

All of us have roles to play in this regard and in integrating the Guiding Principles into legislation, policies and regulation at the national level. Indeed, the duty of the State to protect human rights in the Guiding Principles is directly derived from the existing international human rights obligations of States. But regional organizations can play a vital role in setting a common vision and purpose, defining priorities and supporting and guiding States. We have seen from other issue areas the critical importance of regional coordination.

But the buck does not stop there. Partners can also support: the UN system has a mandate to integrate the Guiding Principles into our strategies and processes, where relevant to our mandates. We can act as partners to national governments in creating development strategies that encourage business respect for human rights.

Home States of transnational companies have a responsibility to ensure that companies headquartered in their jurisdiction respect human rights not only at home, but also abroad. The presence of a number of 'home States' at this Forum indicates an attentiveness to this responsibility.

African strategies for implementing the Guiding Principles and advancing the business and human rights agenda should be driven by African actors, but can draw on support from the international community, take into account the lessons learned from other regions, and reflect the global nature of trade today.

We have four speakers with us today to close the Forum. They have been asked to offer perspectives on further options for States, regional bodies, business, civil society and other actors to shape corporate conduct in the region, and drawing on their own unique experiences and expertise, address the way forward for the African business and human rights agenda. They will also assess the value of the UN Guiding Principles, and provide us with their views on what should the priorities should be for States, business and regional actors such as the AU.

I hope that we can take the important suggestions raised, and let this Forum be a turning point in the role of business in promoting human rights in Africa and beyond.

I thank you all for your important contributions over the last few days, and wish you well in your endeavours to translate the discussions at this Forum into results which can help improve the lives of people across the continent.

Thank you.