



**Opening remarks by Mr. Dante Pesce,  
Chairperson of the Working Group on Business and Human Rights\***

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High Commissioner, excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you in my capacity as chair of the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights that chairs and guides this Forum.

My colleagues in the Working Group and I are pleased to see the high and growing interest in the Forum. This year we have reached new milestones. For the first time a third of the participants come from the private sector. It is also the first time we have the honour of welcoming a Nobel Peace Laureate to address the Forum. And in tomorrow's plenary, the Working Group will bring together leaders from key UN organizations and OECD, for the first time, in a dedicated panel to highlight alignment in our respective efforts to promote responsible business conduct.

It is encouraging that the Forum attracts government delegations from capital and business executives, who come to the Forum to share commitments and lessons learned. The participation by practitioners from governments and business to share experiences on what works is as important. And we are heartened by the continued strong engagement by civil society, not least the representatives of affected individuals and communities, union representatives and human rights defenders, who have travelled from afar to remind us all why we are here.

I believe that everyone attending the Forum is on the same side of history. Coming from different world regions, representing different sectors and interests, we may have different perspectives on how to do things. But we are all here because of the same imperative: the need to ensure that all the children, women and men affected by business activity – whether in the workplace or in their community – are treated with respect for their dignity and human rights. We are all standing up for human rights.

As we know all too well, there are still far too many examples of irresponsible business conduct, sometimes in collusion with government authorities, with dire human rights and environmental consequences. Making progress in tackling adverse business-related impacts on people's rights and dignity is critical for achieving a sustainable future for all.

We are joined by our common purpose and emphasis on the importance of rules-based global governance for solving the problems we are here to discuss. The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights provide us with a common framework for the practical steps we need to take. Our agenda is also part of the direction set by Sustainable Development Goal 17, which invites all of us to be part of a new alliance to find solutions.

The common good belongs to us, and preserving it is the responsibility of each and every one.

Under the theme "Business respect for human rights – building on what works", this year's Forum will focus on the second pillar of the Guiding Principles: the corporate responsibility to respect human rights. We will drill down on the requirement that companies exercise human rights due diligence.

Prevention of negative impacts on people is at the core of due diligence. It helps to answer the question of "how" to respect human rights in practice.

We will be looking at emerging practices in different sectors and what human rights due diligence implies in relation to specific risks and impacts. To highlight but a few, Forum sessions will examine elements of due diligence relevant to safeguarding the rights of children, indigenous peoples, women in the workplace and community, migrant workers, workers at risk of forced labour, and human rights defenders who speak up against business-related impacts. Discussions will also explore implications of human rights due diligence in relation to current issues such as climate justice and the transition to a green economy, the wave of artificial technology and automation, responsible tax conduct, and the role of business in conflict and post-conflict settings.

As the Guiding Principles clarify, the corporate responsibility to respect is closely linked to the obligation of States under international law to protect against business-related human rights abuse and ensure access to remedy.

Accordingly, the Forum continues to put a spotlight on "government action" and how governments are performing in implementing the Guiding Principles. We are proposing a "smart mix" of measures.

Forum sessions will look at how States can incentivize corporate human rights due diligence, through law and policy, and through leading by example in their own roles as economic actors. "Putting the house in order" strengthens States' own leadership and authority.

The Forum will also address the role of the investment community, as the financial sector can be a powerful driver for change. There is an increasing recognition that proper human rights due diligence improves risk management overall and is good for both people and investments. Forum sessions will be asking how investors and others in the investment "eco-system", such as benchmarks and analysts, can drive more and better human rights due diligence by companies.

This year, the Working Group has been taking stock of the state of play of human rights due diligence practices by businesses, and we presented our findings in a report to the UN General Assembly last month.

We found that since the introduction of the Guiding Principles in 2011, corporate human rights due diligence has become a norm of expected conduct, which is increasingly reflected in policy frameworks, at global, regional, national and corporate levels. Yet, in terms of actual implementation, most companies do not demonstrate practices that meet the requirements set by the Guiding Principles, and lack of government action remains a major gap.

In spite of slow progress overall, the good news is that due diligence in practice is possible. The experiences of early adopters and practical tools are building up. The pioneers in the business community understand that being humble and listening to critical voices, and acting accordingly, is at the core of meaningful engagement that underpins trust and sustainable progress.

The fundamental challenge going forward is to speed and scale up efforts and build on the emerging good practices and to address remaining gaps and challenges. This will require concerted efforts by all actors. We need evidence-based public policy and evidence-based business strategy. Doing the right thing is the smart thing to do. But the need for faster progress is urgent.

That is why the Forum is so important, and why we are pleased to have all of you here. Listening to practitioners and those that confront the challenges is the first ingredient in creating change. We need to be humble and open to learn from others' lessons, build on what works and together plug the gaps. Together we should reinforce the key message that respect for human rights is possible and a major contribution to realizing sustainable development.

I wish you all a productive and inspiring Forum!