

[Business | Major companies say human rights defenders and civic freedoms are essential for profitable business](#)

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Major businesses have issued first ever call to protect civic freedoms, human rights defenders and rule of law in a [landmark joint statement](#).



From the murder of [Jamal Khashoggi](#) to politically-motivated charges against [Cambodian trade unionists](#), attacks on human rights defenders and civic freedoms across the world increasingly worry the business community.

The [statement is the first of its kind](#), with supporters ranging across the mining, apparel, banking, jewellery and footwear sectors, and stresses that when human rights defenders are under attack, so is sustainable and profitable business.

On the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the statement sends a clear message that the current wave of attacks is unacceptable for leading companies and investors.

Unilever, adidas, Primark, ABN AMRO, Anglo American, Leber Jeweler, Domini and the Investors Alliance on Human Rights are among the supporters.

These business and investors “affirm the crucial role of human rights defenders and [their] firm commitment to the protection of civic freedoms” and recognise the responsibility of businesses and investors to respect human rights defenders. Supporters of the statement commit “to find effective ways business can [positively contribute to situations where civic freedoms and human rights defenders are under threat](#)”.

As **Paul Polman, CEO of Unilever & chair of The B Team**, said: “Given the increasing vulnerability of human rights defenders and shrinking space where they can operate safely, business has a role and a responsibility to defend and promote fundamental rights and freedoms.”

“We stand firmly behind these principles, which are aligned with our own published approach to safeguarding human rights defenders and our longstanding belief in free, fair and open societies, where freedom of expression and assembly is the norm, not the exception”, said **William Anderson, vice president social and environmental affairs Asia Pacific at the Adidas Group**, the first company in the world to issue a stand-alone policy on human rights defenders.

“ABN AMRO is very happy to receive positive signals from clients after sharing our support for this statement. Many of our clients - especially NGOs - experience restrictions on their civic freedoms as well as access to financial services. This problem can only be effectively addressed in collaboration between governments, civil society and business”, said **Maria Anne van Dijk, global head of environmental, social and ethical risk and policy at ABN AMRO**.

Nearly six in ten countries are seriously restricting people’s fundamental freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression, while only 3% of people on the planet live in countries with truly ‘open civic space’, according to research by CIVICUS.

The work of civil society and human rights defenders to protect fundamental freedoms continues to be undermined by governments and actors in the private sector through a range of tactics, including threats and physical attacks, judicial harassment, burdensome administrative requirements, and limitations on the receipt of funding, among others.

Today’s statement stresses the crucial role of human rights defenders in identifying risks or problems in business activities, encouraging due diligence and in the provision of remedy.

Phil Bloomer, Executive Director of the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre (BHRRRC), said: *"Hats off to these ground-breaking companies and investors. In a context of worsening attacks on civic freedoms worldwide, this international group of companies speaks up to protect civic freedoms, human rights defenders, and rule of law. This is vital to workers and communities and wider society. It is also crucial to stable, profitable, and sustainable business. Other responsible businesses and investors should follow rapidly. There is no time to lose."*

Michael Ineichen, Programme Director of the International Service for Human Rights, said: *"Human rights defenders work to ensure that every person has access to quality education, a decent job, secure housing, a healthy environment and a doctor when we're sick. By standing alongside human rights defenders, leading companies protect this critical contribution to a more positive future."*

A [recent report](#) from The B Team found clear evidence that limits on important civic freedoms are linked to negative economic outcomes. Countries with higher degrees of respect for civic rights experience higher economic growth rates as well as higher levels of human development.

These ideas are further explored in a [recent guidance document](#) released by BHRRRC and the International Service for Human Rights. It sets out the normative, business, and moral cases for action, and proposes a decision framework to guide companies on how to support civic freedoms and defenders.

Contact: Michael Ineichen, Programme Director, m.ineichen@ishr.ch, +41 78 827 77 86