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Davos: World leaders protecting business over rights in economic crisis

Governments' failure to regulate business effectively is having a devastating impact on the rights of society's most vulnerable people, Amnesty International warned today, ahead of this week's World Economic Forum in Davos.

"The economic crisis, and how governments have chosen to address it, poses a clear and unambiguous risk to the rights of people in many countries," said Amnesty International Secretary General Salil Shetty. "Davos cannot afford to be a congratulatory club for the rich and powerful. We must use this opportunity to challenge the orthodoxy of the policies being pursued and ensure governments meet their responsibilities."

Corporate malpractice has been allowed to flourish by government policies of deregulation and limited oversight. In the pursuit of profit, financial institutions have been given a free pass to create systems that expose the most vulnerable groups to exploitation as corporate greed takes precedent over accountability and transparency.

"Most governments do not see the connection between financial systems, economic policy and human rights. But wherever you go today you can see people who have lost their jobs, their homes and are struggling even to afford food, you cannot fail to see the devastating impact on people's basic rights," said Salil Shetty.

"Rather than ensuring their policies protect human rights, governments are retreating to old approaches and cosy relationships that will lock in long term inequalities for generations. This is a man-made crisis and the solutions being offered by leaders risk repeating the gross failures of the past."

Governments are legally bound to consider how the policies and programmes they implement affect human rights. In reality, many governments do not conduct even rudimentary assessments of the potential impact of their economic policies on rights.

An estimated 50 million people globally have fallen into poverty because of the current crisis, with 64 million more thought to be at risk at the end of 2011.

Governments are consistently failing to regulate the corporate sector, trusting in their false promises of self-regulation, creating a toxic environment that is showing signs of boiling over as people take to the streets demanding an end to corruption, corporate greed and injustice.

"Time and again, the failure of businesses to self-regulate has resulted in shocking accounts of abuses, unethical behaviour and corruption. If the current crisis illustrates nothing else, it shows how badly things can go if left without effective oversight," said Salil Shetty.

Protests, demonstrations and social unrest have been used by vast swathes of communities across the world to highlight their discontentment with governments and businesses but the response to protests has been mixed. In numerous cases the focus has been more about ending protests by whatever means, rather than addressing the legitimate underlying issues.

“In country after country, government actions are leaving ordinary people bearing the brunt of the fallout from the crisis,” said Salil Shetty. “But people are uniting in protest, demanding more accountable governments – ones that effectively regulate businesses, respect human rights, and provide access to justice when rights have been abused.”

To reclaim their legitimacy as leaders, Amnesty International is calling on governments to ensure that their responses to the protests respect human rights and address the underlying issues being raised by protesters.

“Business and political leaders need to recognize the need for a new approach that is fair and inclusive,” said Salil Shetty. “Instead of entrenching the divide between rich and poor, they need to adopt growth plans that address this divide. They must place people’s rights at the heart of any solutions. Otherwise, the recent social unrest unfolding in countries across the world could only be the beginning.”

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To arrange an interview with Salil Shetty in Davos and to receive a copy of an Amnesty International briefing paper looking human rights and the response to the economic crisis, please contact:

Davos:	London:
Daniel Graf	Tom Mackey
+41 79 379 80 37	+44 20 7413 5810
dagraf@amnesty.ch	tom.mackey@amnesty.org

Salil Shetty is speaking at the ‘Corporate Justice’ rally in Davos on Wednesday 25th January 2.15 - 2.45 p.m. Rathausplatz, Berglistutz 1, Davos Platz.