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Enduring Human Rights in an Age of Business

The expansion of international trade over the last few decades due to trade liberalisation supported by institutions such as the World Trade Organization has resulted in an unprecedented internationalisation of corporate activities. Corporations now have activities in many countries and most are connected to the international market through suppliers outside their home state. Through these business activities, corporations have become increasingly linked to countries with poor human rights records.

Globalisation, the internationalisation of corporate activities in the global market, the creation of even larger corporate entities, and the growth of corporate power vis-à-vis state power have radically restructured the equilibrium of corporate relations with state and society. Multinational corporations, for instance, often have no loyalty to a certain place or community. Today, many corporations are *de facto* stronger and more influential actors than states, and their activities have concrete effects on political, cultural, and societal aspects – including human rights – in the countries where they operate or to which they have other business links. These developments have created new kinds of challenges for protecting human rights.

While business and corporate activities produce positive effects on societies, including supporting the realisation of a broad spectrum of human rights, these activities in poorly regulated markets may also have negative consequences, such as strengthening poor working conditions and abusing workers. It is precisely these kinds of externalities that have triggered discussions on corporate responsibility in the area of human rights. In practice, many corporations have been implicated in the most serious of human rights abuses.

In my presentation light is shed on international efforts to regulate corporate activities in order to limit their negative effects on human rights. The remarks made are based on my study on corporate activities and human rights published in 2009 (*Yritystoiminta ja ihmisoikeudet*, Publications of the Erik Castrén Institute of International Law and Human Rights, University of Helsinki, the Erik Castrén Research Reports 26/2009, Helsinki 2009).