



global witness

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Global Witness welcomes new government's promises of reform on corruption, aid, the environment and civil liberties

The programme for government published today by the UK's new coalition government includes commitments and pledges in several of Global Witness key campaign areas. "Having lobbied hard for change on illegal logging, libel reform, aid transparency and white collar crime during the last parliament, we welcome these promises and anticipate swift and meaningful action on each count," said Global Witness Director Charmian Gooch.

Libel reform:

The policy statement promises a "review of libel laws to protect freedom of speech". As a key member of the [Libel Reform Campaign](#), Global Witness has long called for such measures. England's outdated libel and privacy laws often work to protect the dubious interests of a wealthy minority over those of the public. This campaign secured a major victory at the end of the last parliament, with a review panel convened by Justice Secretary Jack Straw recommending sweeping reforms including measures to counter libel tourism, recognition of the need to better define and protect 'public interest' reporting, and a commitment to a 'single publication rule'.

"We're pleased that the new government has signalled its commitment to libel reform and we look forward to seeing the detail of their proposals. England's libel laws have long been a national disgrace. The coalition should implement the sensible recommendations in the expert panel's report," said Gooch.

"We also need to see the new government re-table proposals to limit the success fees that libel lawyers can charge, which were blocked at the end of the last parliament. These arrangements are currently exploited by lawyers working on a 'no-win-no-fee' basis and act as a disincentive to public interest campaigners who self-censor rather than run the risk of facing ruinous legal costs."

Illegal logging:

The document also pledges to introduce "measures to make the import or possession of illegal timber a criminal offence." Importantly, this clarifies the UK position ahead of June's meeting of the EU Council of Agriculture Ministers at which EU legislation to control illegal timber imports will be discussed. The new government should advocate strongly for improved EU legislation at this meeting.

"Without strong measures in importing countries like the UK, we may lose the fight to end deforestation in developing countries, and ultimately the battle to reverse climate change," said Dr. Rosalind Reeve of Global Witness. "The new government's commitment to criminalise import and possession of illegal timber shows much-needed leadership on this issue in the EU."

Illegal logging is one of the major drivers behind the destruction of tropical forests, and a globally significant source of greenhouse gas emissions. Up to 20% of all such emissions are estimated to come from deforestation and forest degradation and illegal logging costs developing countries an estimated US\$15 billion per annum.

"To be effective, new legislation on illegal timber must make UK companies responsible for proving that they are not buying and selling illegally harvested timber and wood products. We need swift and decisive action now", said Dr Reeve. "The UK is one of six countries that has

committed up to US\$3.5 billion to help developing countries reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation. This money will be wasted if we fail to clean up international markets.”

White Collar Crime:

The new government has stated its commitment to tackling white collar crime. This is a positive step in the fight to end global corruption. The measures needed include firm action against British financial institutions that hold money for corrupt officials from the developing world.

“Corruption and state looting - facilitated by UK banks - entrench poverty, hinder development and undermine the UK’s aid to poor countries. The coalition must also ensure that the UK’s Overseas Territories take action against those who provide financial secrecy services such as front companies and bank accounts to corrupt officials,” said Global Witness campaigner Anthea Lawson.

Aid Transparency:

Finally, the policy statement makes sweeping commitments to improving transparency in the UK’s international aid donations. Such measures are important, but will not be sufficient to prevent corruption and achieve development goals.

“In countries where government institutions have been captured by corrupt rulers, transparency on the part of external donors does little to prevent the looting of these countries’ own revenues by recipient governments. Measures to support improved governance will be necessary to ensure that British taxpayers’ generosity achieves the good ends for which it is intended, and that recipient countries can ultimately move towards less dependence on aid,” said Eleanor Nichol, Global Witness campaigner.

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Global Witness investigates and campaigns to end natural resource-related conflict and corruption and associated environmental and human rights abuses.