Independent Home | News | Sport | Argument | Education | Motoring | Money | Jobs | Travel | Enjoyment

Home > Argument > Podium

From a speech by Christian Aid's senior policy officer, Andrew Pendleton, given at a Just Share meeting in London

Imagine if Britain's roads had no rules. If the cameras, traffic police and speed limits were all removed. There may not be complete anarchy, but the expectation that we should not drive overly quickly in cities or take to the wheel after a night at the pub would certainly be open to greater abuse. We could do these things with impunity.

This is the situation in which multinational corporations often find themselves in poor countries. Because of either a lack of rules or poor enforcement, multinationals can, and do, offend with impunity.

Corporate social responsibility – or CSR – evolved as a compromise solution to the problem of low social and environmental standards. CSR suggests that business can self-regulate and raise standards.

But the glossy reports and expensive consultants that have developed around the CSR movement can mask the gap that exists between corporate rhetoric and the reality faced by poor people affected by the actions of multinationals. Recent examples expose some of CSR's frailties. In Kerala, India, for instance, Coca-Cola stands accused of depriving local communities of essential water supplies by taking too much ground water for its drinks plant.

Over time, we've learnt we need rules to govern how people use Britain's roads. They don't stop offenders altogether, but they mean fewer of us are inclined to take the risk and – most importantly – that the victims can seek justice. We now need to learn from the cases of corporate abuse that still abound, and make binding international social and environmental rules.