

TED backs unmasking bad actors behind shell firms

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Former TED Prize winner Bono speaks at TED2013: "The Young, The Wise, The Undiscovered" in Long Beach on February 26, 2013

TED threw its weight behind a quest to unmask evil doers who use "shell companies" to hide illicit wealth or fund foul deeds.

Global Witness co-founder Charmian Gooch enlisted the TED community with the revelation of a "wish" that accompanies a million-

dollar prize awarded to the anti-corruption activist by the prestigious group known for technology titans, political leaders, celebrities and others with clout and resources.

"My wish is for us to know who owns and controls companies so they can no longer be used anonymously," Gooch said during an interview at the gathering.

"Let's launch a new era of openness in business. It sounds ambitious, but it is doable."

Global Witness investigates and campaigns to bring about change for the better by exposing economic networks behind conflict, corruption and environmental destruction.

TED curator Chris Anderson called Gooch a "hero" who "is coming to TED with a real powerful call to action."

No laws in any countries require companies to list who their owners are and then make that information public, Gooch lamented.

Scandal in plain sight

Meanwhile, nefarious characters ranging from corrupt heads of state to drug lords can hide or move assets through anonymous shell companies in what Gooch referred to as "an epic scandal hidden in plain sight."

Shell companies with hidden owners are used to sidestep government sanctions or plunder natural resources from poor communities, according to Global Witness.



TED Curator Chris Anderson pictured in Pasadena, California on January 13, 2012

Gooch said the British government is already on board with her goal, and that the European Parliament is tuning into the idea. The United States is the next big target for the campaign.

"People like to think of anonymous companies as these sunny offshore tax havens," Gooch said.

"Actually, the big problem is onshore in the US and the UK."

US senators backing legislation to combat corporate secrecy praised the TED Prize going to Gooch and her wish.

"Today, money launderers, arms dealers, drug lords, terrorists and tax evaders are too often able to conceal their misconduct behind a wall of corporate secrecy," Senator Carl Levin, a Michigan Democrat, said in a release.

Levin and Republican Senator Chuck Grassley of Iowa introduced the Incorporation Transparency and Law Enforcement Assistance Act to combat transnational crime by requiring incorporation applications to include lists of true owners of companies.

The Global Witness wish and the million dollars infused into the group's campaign should add momentum a bill that already has backing from police agencies, anti-corruption groups, human rights organizers, business groups and labor organizations, according to Levin.

While a senator, US President Barack Obama co-sponsored a version of the legislation.

"Prosecutors of financial crimes follow the money," Grassley said in a release.

"It's hard for them to do that when criminals are able to exploit corporate transparency laws."

The prize money will fund campaign operations by Global Witness and its 80-person team, said Gooch, who hoped that technology wizards in the TED community would help create a prototype online registry that could serve as a model for countries.

The campaign is even tapping into online social networking by urging

people to "like" and End Anonymous Companies page at Facebook.

"We would really like for business leaders in the tech community to get behind this wish," Gooch said.

"The TED community is the coolest on the planet, so this is amazing for us."

The list of TED Prize winners includes U2 frontman and ONE campaign champion Bono; ocean defender Sylvia Earle, and former US President Bill Clinton.

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