**What happened at the Annual Forum on Business and Human Rights?**

Over 2000 participants, 22% from the business world, gathered at the Annual Forum for Business and Human Rights in Geneva this year. This, alongside increasing implementation of the UNGPs, reflects continued growth of the business and human rights field.

GLOBAL CSR once again was present at the Forum sharing key learning from our work with companies implementing the UNGPs and not least from our work on developing business’ capacity to tackle human rights. In this blog we share a couple of highlights and key themes in this year’s discussions with those of you that were unable to join.

Impatience on state progress!

Even though there is increasing public recognition of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), National Action Plans (NAPs) are still few and existing ones fail to be action-oriented and cause change. Many Forum participants highlighted how crucial the role of the state is when enabling business respect for human rights.

One argument used by some states against national implementation of the UNGPs (and creating a NAP) is that it may soon become redundant, due to on-going diplomatic discussions to potentially create a legally binding treaty on business and human rights. However the message at the Forum to states (and corporations) was clear: The treaty process and the UNGPs are mutually beneficial and complimentary! Using the treaty process as an excuse for not implementing the UNGPs hinders the realization of business respect for human rights. Instead, the UN Human Rights Council and Forum panellists urged for a continued implementation of the UNGPs through the adoption of meaningful and action-oriented NAPs.

Speed and scale up corporate implementation of the UNGPs

The general perception of business implementation of the UNGPs was surprisingly positive at this years Forum. There was praise for the significant efforts made by some very committed companies. Nevertheless, challenges remain. Answers need to be found to questions such as: How do we broaden the scope of companies working with the UNGPs? How do we get from responsible commitment and conduct to responsible results? How do we ensure coherent capacity building efforts? How do we incentivise business respect for human rights?

Other challenges repeatedly raised included a limited implementation of access to remedy, even among companies who put a lot of effort into respecting human rights. This however raises an opportunity for businesses to become frontrunners at designing well-functioning grievance mechanisms, instead of having to fit into other business interpretations at a later stage.

Secondly a need to clarify the UNGPs’ expectations towards Responsible Supply Chain Management came up. There seemed to be broad agreement among participants that auditing is not the answer to ensure respect for human rights among suppliers. Audits were compared by one panellist to quick “antibiotics injections” that don’t build up long-term antibodies. Another mentioned how “you don’t fatten a pig by weighing it.” However, there is not (yet) agreement on how to coherently implement the UNGPs in procurement and supply chain management. Our expertise in GLOBAL CSR in implementing a UNGPs-aligned RSCM approach with businesses has shown that full alignment between the expectations you put towards your suppliers and the UNGPs gives your efforts global legitimacy and enables a simpler and more cost-efficient model. It also facilitates constructive partnerships with your suppliers enabling that both of you respect human rights.

‘If you can’t measure, you can’t manage’

This business doctrine was highlighted multiple times throughout the Annual Forum. It created the basis for one of the main topics: How can we measure progress of the UNGPs’ implementation? This topic gave cause for further questions: What is progress? What indicators could we use? How to measure impact? How to ensure measurement is in alignment with the UNGPs?

One suggestion is to use existing data as a starting point, but new indicators and new ways of measuring need to be agreed upon. This is being developed by different initiatives, one idea being to catalyse change through benchmarking, as this might be an effective market mechanism to encourage respect for human rights. But in order to do this, more communication in the ‘knowing and showing’ spirit of the UNGPs is needed (which also is an essential step of the due diligence process). We would highly appreciate seeing this type of communication and the sharing of results from (pilot) human rights impact assessments.

However it is important to remember that indicators used for such a benchmarking or measuring exercise will need to be in full alignment with the UNGPs - and should trigger an implementation of the UNGPs in their entirety. Measuring progress should enable more progress, where progress needs to be pre-defined by the UNGPs themselves.

The way forward

Despite the impressive progress made since 2011, there still is a long way to go to realize business’ respect for human rights. Not only do we need to see more states committing to, and implementing the protection of, human rights, we also need to see corporations of all sizes in all countries implementing all elements of respect for human rights. It is crucial to remember that we all have already agreed on a framework on how to go about it.

However it was great to see so many participants discussing these challenges in detail, relating them to the authoritative minimum standard defined by the UNGPs, and different stakeholders committing to tackling these challenges in a consultative manner.

Margaret Jungk, chairman of the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights, gives us a nice thought to keep in mind for the work to come in this field: A one-stop-shop for business and human rights guidance might not be doable, but it is crucial to focus on a one-stop message: respect for human rights.

In GLOBAL CSR we hope to see this message materialize in an increased and coherent implementation of the UNGPs over the next months and years. And we look forward to doing our part!

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