

SUPPORTING CIVIC FREEDOMS, HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND THE RULE OF LAW

The protection of civic freedoms and respect for the rule of law are vitally important for both civil society and business⁽¹⁾. Free, open societies enable well-functioning markets, stable financial systems and good governance. In contrast, efforts to limit civil society and civic freedoms undermine open societies, foster corruption, limit competition, critical thought and innovation.⁽²⁾

By some estimates only 3% of the world's population live in countries where freedom of expression, association and assembly are fully upheld. Many reports document increasing restrictions of fundamental human rights, and repression and violence against civil society and human rights defenders.

2018 marks the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the 20th anniversary of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. We take this opportunity to affirm the crucial role of human rights defenders and our firm commitment to the protection of civic freedoms.

Only where human rights and the rule of law are protected and respected can civil society actors do their critical work. This is not just the responsibility of governments. In line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, business enterprises, including investors, have a duty to respect human rights and human rights defenders. Fulfilment of this duty enhances the private sector's 'social license' to operate and can help respond to the challenges of our time, including rising inequality, xenophobia, discrimination, climate change, and polarisation.

Therefore:

- We recognise that defenders are important partners in identifying risks or problems in our business activities, encouraging due diligence and in the provision of remedy when harm occurs. When they are under attack, so are sustainable business practices.
- We are exploring how policies and practices can be strengthened to ensure we respect and do not interfere with the work of civil society and human rights defenders.
- We strongly encourage governments to protect civic freedoms everywhere. This includes ensuring that civil society and human rights defenders are free from abuse, harassment, intimidation, physical attacks or from limitations on their rights to freedom of speech, assembly, association and movement individually and collectively
- We will work to find effective ways business can positively contribute to situations where civic freedoms and human rights defenders are under threat.

This statement was developed through the Business Network on Civic Freedoms and Human Rights Defenders and is supported by the following companies and investors:



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The Business Network on Civic Freedoms and Human Rights Defenders is an informal network of companies, convened and facilitated by Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, The B Team and The International Service for Human Rights. Started in 2015, it intends to explore the role of companies in helping to protect civic freedoms and human rights defenders and serves as a space for discussion and exchange of information, advice and strategies in this regard. It enables mutual learning, and may be used flexibly to initiate individual or collective action around the world.

¹ See for instance the report of the Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders to the General Assembly: <http://undocs.org/a/72/170>.

² This is supported by the World Economic Forum's Global Risk Report which identified the "Fraying Rule of Law and Declining Civic Freedoms: Citizens and Civic Space at Risk" as a top challenge facing the world.