

## Don't Underestimate Human Rights

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More and more businesses are making a commitment to respect human rights. Such commitments often take the form of a carefully worded policy or position statement to tie the business to the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights or the UN Global Compact. They are often one of a suite of corporate responsibility and governance policies. While other policies may also speak to human rights concerns such as equal opportunities or HIV status, the human rights policy often seems to sit in isolation. An apparently minor part of the corporate responsibility agenda, relevant only when operating in a limited number of 'challenging' countries.

But this is the 21st Century and the concept of human rights is evolving. No longer do we simply see human rights as protection for the individual from state action. Increasingly human rights are recognised as guiding principles for today's society - not just for governments, but for each and everyone of us, business included. Our daily news is dominated by rights concerns and discourse: migration, employment practices, conflict, social cohesion, education, access to and affordability of energy and water. Human rights are as relevant in the developed as the developing world.

By 2050, there will be 50% more people on the planet. Already resource constrained, climate changes and migration will exacerbate demand on resources globally and locally. Beyond the serious operational challenges these pose for businesses they will also shine a harsh spotlight on questions of equity, fairness and justice. Ownership and distribution of resources such as arable land, water and energy will be closely scrutinised. Claims of rights to these goods and challenges to business consumption of them will increase. If businesses are to successfully navigate the social landscape of the 21st Century, they will need to develop a deeper and more holistic understanding of human rights.

Human rights are more than just legal measures. A culture of respecting human rights will not emerge simply by conforming with legislation - no more so than a health and safety culture does. A business that makes a commitment to human rights is prepared to be judged not by the business-articulated measures of corporate responsibility, but by the established expectations of society itself. There is a critical need to interpret established human rights knowledge in ways that are relevant and meaningful for businesses - to continue to evolve our understanding of human rights. That work has been started by initiatives such as the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights, the various supply chain initiatives and the Business Leaders Initiative on Human Rights.

Rather than minimise human rights responsibilities, business should see human rights as principles to guide all their interactions with individuals, communities and society as a whole. All corporate policies need to be guided by human rights rather than treating human rights as a standalone policy. Many practices of most businesses already respect human rights - such is the nature of how these rights have evolved. A human rights approach serves to develop and enhance responsible business practices and sustainable societies.

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