

BSR Conference 2008 | Sustainability: Leadership Required

Corporate Responsibility to Respect Human Rights

Breakout Session Summary

Wednesday, November 5, 2008 | 10-11:30 a.m.

Speakers

- **Christine Bader**, Advisor to the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Business and Human Rights
- **Aidan Davy**, Program Director, International Council on Mining and Metals
- **Marlova Jovchelovitch Noletto**, Coordinator, Social and Human Sciences Sector, UNESCO Brazil
- **Soraya Ramoul**, Advisor, Corporate Responsibility, Novo Nordisk
- **Faris Natour**, Director of Research, Human Rights, Business for Social Responsibility (moderator)

Highlights

- Because the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights was intended as a state-to-state framework, companies must make the decision internally to embrace the framework.
- To demystify human rights for non-experts, it's helpful to break down the rights and categorize them in buckets like employee impacts, security impacts, and community impacts.

Memorable Quotes

- “Talking about a human rights framework can create fear, and you have to focus on its relevance to the business case.” —Soraya Ramoul, Novo Nordisk
- “You must take the approach that human rights are indivisible and not separate from issues of climate change and extreme poverty.” —Marlova Jovchelovitch Noletto, UNESCO Brazil

Overview

The corporation's responsibility to respect all human rights is affirmed by the recent report by John Ruggie, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Business and Human Rights. This responsibility requires companies to conduct due diligence on the potential and actual human rights impacts of their operations, and to incorporate human rights into their policies and practices.

The Ruggie framework began in 2003 as a set of norms that spelled out important issues for businesses and addressed the responsibilities of governments. Though some advocacy groups wanted to make these norms international law, instead, John Ruggie was appointed to oversee the development of the framework. He began by identifying which rights were at stake, and then he worked with UN treaty bodies to learn their opinions on transnational corporations. He also researched what companies themselves recognized as human rights.

According to Bader, this process allowed many stakeholders to help define and clarify the roles of corporations and governments in protecting human rights. The intent was to clearly

define companies' responsibility for human rights and to provide direction on due diligence and grievance mechanisms for remedying the issues. But the challenge was to create something of value that could be applied universally to all sectors.

Davy said his organization, the International Council on Mining and Minerals (ICMM), which works with the 18 top mining companies, collaborated with Ruggie to help develop the framework and now fully supports it. Because of the potential for the extractives industry to face human rights violations, Davy looks at this framework as a genuine resource to handle allegations against companies in that sector. He added that the framework is helpful in clarifying the responsibilities of governments and businesses, defining the scope of due diligence, and focusing strongly on grievance mechanisms.

Ramoul said that Novo Nordisk, which was one of the first companies to integrate human rights into its decision-making, began by doing a baseline assessment of their current procedures and practices to determine where human rights were already integrated. While she said the Ruggie framework is a constructive approach, she added that it lacks specific direction for how companies can implement human rights into their operations.

Noleto agreed that determining concrete ways to implement the Ruggie framework is a challenge, but perhaps an even greater challenge is that many CEOs don't know about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, let alone the Ruggie framework. She added that an important part of making the business case for human rights protection is using metrics in human rights impact assessments.

During the Q&A, one participant asked how a company should act when countries themselves do not adhere to international human rights conventions. Bader replied that the corporate responsibility to protect human rights is not based on law but on social expectations.

This summary is also available on www.bsr.org/bsrconferences/2008/session-summaries.cfm.