

BSR Conference 2008 | Sustainability: Leadership Required

Forced Labor and Human Trafficking

Breakout Session Summary

Wednesday, November 5, 2008 | 2-3:30 p.m.

Speakers

- **Branka Minic**, Director, Global Corporate Affairs, Manpower
- **Margaret Ellen Roggensack**, Policy Director, Free the Slaves
- **Benjamin Skinner**, Author, *A Crime So Monstrous: Face-to-Face with Modern-Day Slavery* (moderator)

Highlights

- Slaves are defined as those who are forced to work under the threat of violence for little or no pay. The International Labour Organization conservatively estimates that 12.3 million people fall into this category; in Southeast Asia, an estimated 10 to 20 million people are forced to work in the sex economy as prostitutes.
- A relatively small amount of slave input actually goes into the products most consumers buy.

Memorable Quotes

- “Poverty is really the root cause of trafficking and forced labor.” —Branka Minic, Manpower
- “Transparency and good business practices lead to better sales. It’s not just an altruistic add on; it should be part of core competencies. ” —Benjamin Skinner, Author
- “Modern-day slavery is all around us, and it is hard to identify and target who is responsible for the abuse.” —Margaret Ellen Roggensack, Free the Slaves

Overview

Slavery today typically exists in the supply chains of businesses in the form of forced labor and human trafficking. To address the problem, Skinner said corporate CEOs need to take responsibility by learning about their contractors and sub-contractors and working toward transparency of their supply chain.

Surprisingly, Roggensack said, a relatively small amount of slave labor actually goes into the products we buy. Unfortunately, slave labor is typically at the bottom of a long, opaque supply chain, making it challenging to identify and target who is responsible for the abuse.

Minic, whose clients often come to Manpower with complex supply chain issues, echoes this sentiment. Companies don’t always know who is supplying their labor.

According to Roggensack and Skinner, human trafficking and forced labor problem are rooted in poverty and a lack of governance. Many of the countries where slave labor is found lack resources and established labor laws with mechanisms for enforcement.

But the problem is not insurmountable. Companies can play a role in filling in the governance gap by acknowledging the problem and becoming informed of the difficult realities. Minic, who finds it helpful to think in terms of “circles of influence,” suggested mapping out the stakeholders involved. Another effective option is to develop stakeholder initiatives for many different actors to come together and communicate about the issues. This promotes awareness and also places pressure on those who are responsible.

Roggensack gave three examples of successful initiatives: an international cocoa initiative, which was the first time an entire industry took steps to eradicate child labor; Brazil, the only country with a plan to completely eradicate slave labor; and one organization in Southeast Asia that has publicized the issue of international prostitution through an extensive public awareness campaign.

Roggensack and Skinner said that multi-stakeholder initiatives are some of the strongest vehicles to further the agenda, but eradicating slave labor takes time. Furthermore, in order for the results to last, the issues need to be dealt with systemically and at their roots.

In the Q&A, a participant asked about whether it was possible to ever really know how, where, and under what conditions a product was made. Roggensack responded by saying that while it’s very difficult to know every last detail about the integrity of a product, it is possible to learn about forms of child labor within an industry. And a lot can be learned between sectors.

Skinner added that an open-source portal or clearinghouse for information about where materials come from would have systemic impacts. Roggensack said it’s also important to engage the community, inform them of the problem, and identify solutions that have a lasting impact.

Minic encouraged people to mobilize consumers, encourage more regulation, and to keep in mind that progress has been made.

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