

The Nexus of Climate Change and Human Rights

Emerging Issues for Global Companies

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Though climate change and human rights are important corporate responsibility issues on their own terms, they are increasingly interrelated. This article focuses on climate change mitigation, adaptation, and the direct impacts of climate change on human rights.

As our global climate destabilizes, there will be an increase in water stress, food scarcity, the prevalence and intensity of diseases, and the loss of homelands and jobs around the world. In turn, climate change is likely to affect several rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), such as the right to life and security, the right to food, and the right to health.

Meanwhile, efforts to mitigate climate change are creating new human rights problems. In particular, countries like China that are currently industrializing, are concerned that regulation may unjustly hamper their economic rights by preventing them from growing. (Indeed, finding common ground on this issue is largely what developing a post-Kyoto global treaty depends on.)

Another challenge is that most mitigation scenarios rely on using global finance to lead carbon-reduction activities in communities where the cost of doing so is fairly low. However, this has had unintended human rights consequences for vulnerable

populations in those communities. For example, in order to earn carbon credit, there have been carbon market activities to protect forests in Uganda. Yet those same activities—aimed at reducing climate change—also impact local people who feel they are being kicked off their land.

In spite of these interdependencies, the relationship between climate change and human rights has only recently been acknowledged, and it still receives scant attention. One reason is that the human rights community needs to broaden its focus from specific, visible impacts on human rights to likelihoods caused by climate change over time. Another challenge is that business approaches to managing climate change have tended to focus on quantifiable risk as opposed to more holistic appraisals.

As governments and advocates come to grips with how climate change and human rights are inextricably linked, managers looking to get ahead of the curve would do well to think of the connections between the two.

Three key issues are emerging for companies:

1. Energy is *the* problem—and an opportunity. Energy is responsible for nearly two-thirds of global greenhouse gas emissions and more than 95 percent of emissions for typical

companies, so moving to low-carbon energy is crucial for stopping climate change. Energy is also the key to helping the 1.6 billion people without regular access to the grid realize their economic rights as they attempt to adapt. In this respect, companies that enable a transition to affordable, clean energy will enjoy commercial success and help advance the communities where they operate.

2. Mitigation and adaptation require significant trade-offs.

Climate change means more competition for fewer resources, and the future will favor those who are already well off, while affecting the disadvantaged the most. Mitigation and adaptation, therefore, require hard decisions about land use, access to natural resources, and opportunities for economic development. This is true everywhere, but the issues are most evident in Asia, which holds the world's largest population base.

3. Scrutiny of companies is increasing. As legal specialists like Climate Justice and the Climate Law Institute emerge, there is growing support for creating a legal liability for the impacts climate change has on human rights. Meanwhile, watchdog organizations such as the Carbon Disclosure Project, Corpwatch, the Climate Lobby Database, and Oil Change are boosting efforts to publish public lists of companies that emit heavily or lobby against emissions regulation.

Climate Change as a Human Rights Issue

The effects of climate change are cumulative, and, so far, those effects have been relatively slow and incremental. Human rights managers who want to get ahead should compliment their



localized, site-specific approaches with broad, long-term frameworks that take into account how climate change will impact business-relevant human rights issues. Based on this, risk mitigation strategies may deliver both climate and human rights benefits. More importantly, by taking an integrated look at these two challenges, human rights managers may help spark innovative approaches to accessible technologies like small-scale irrigation, drought-tolerant seeds, medicines,

and weather-related insurance.

These managers can also educate their colleagues about the importance of incorporating climate change into their work. Pfizer and GSK have begun to do this by publicly communicating their views on how their companies help alleviate human problems caused by climate change. Managers might begin by dispelling common myths, like the sentiment that climate change is narrowly an “environmental” problem.

Human Rights as a Climate Change Issue

On the flip side of this coin, managers who are responsible for their company's climate change impacts also need to consider human rights.

These individuals, often finance and energy managers, are generally charged with making direct investments—buying or selling carbon market instruments, recommending sites for new facilities, procuring energy and water, carrying out remediation activities, and engaging with suppliers—that can impact the human rights of communities in areas where these investments take place. For instance, if a project involves establishing a new

plant in an area that will place stress on that community's water resources, over time this may impact the community's right to food, safe water, and health—especially if the community's water resources are already suffering from climate-change-related drought.

Finally, managers should beware of adaptation's pitfalls—namely, growing instability in communities where people feel they are disenfranchised—while prioritizing the development of strong foundations for a world of climate instability.

To address these challenges, climate change managers can use quantitative analysis to represent the longer-term trends of climate change while doing qualitative research via community engagement to determine potential human rights issues.

The Nexus of Climate Change and Human Rights as a Strategy Issue

The link between climate change and human rights presents enterprise-level risks and opportunities that require attention by those setting company strategy—the senior executives and boards. Lengthening time horizons and broadening measuring tools for decision-making is key.

Senior-level executives have an opportunity to help their companies address climate change and human rights by promoting quantitative data analysis with qualitative, holistic thinking. At the same time, they should promote aligned, consistent actions throughout their companies—particularly among their marketing, public relations, and government affairs teams.

Companies that do this will be ahead of the game—and ultimately more efficient, with lower risk profiles as climate change unfolds and companies are held to higher account for human rights. ■

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More Reading on Climate Change and Human Rights

[Climate Change and Human Rights: A Rough Guide:](#) A report by the International Council on Human Rights Policy on the relationship between climate change and human rights, and the policy implications of that link.

[Climate Wrongs and Human Rights: Putting People at the Heart of Climate Change Policy:](#) An Oxfam briefing paper that focuses on putting people at the center of climate change policy.

[Integrating Human Rights into Energy and Environmental Programming:](#) A reference paper on integrating human rights into energy and environmental programming.

[Human Rights and Climate Change:](#) A background paper from the Australian Human Rights Commission.

[Climate Change, Human Rights, and Indigenous Peoples:](#) A submission to the United Nations high commissioner on human rights by the International Indian Treaty Council.

[Forests, Climate Change, and Human Rights: Managing Risk and Trade-Offs:](#) A paper from the Center for International Forestry Research.

[Climate Change 2007 Synthesis Report:](#) A report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

[Climate Change and Human Health:](#) A World Health Organization report on some social impacts of climate change.