

Overview of UN Human Rights approach to engagement with the business sector

1. Context

The United Nations has a longstanding history of engagement with the business sector. Resolution 55/215, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2001, affirmed the central role of the UN in promoting partnerships, stressing that partnerships with the private sector could contribute in a positive manner to meet the challenges of globalization and ensure that it becomes a positive force for all.¹

The Secretary General has presented several reports to the General Assembly on enhanced cooperation by the UN with the private sector since the adoption of resolution 55/215. More recently, the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals reaffirmed the role of the private sector in achieving sustainable development and called on “all businesses to apply their creativity and innovation to solving sustainable development challenges”. SDG 17 recognizes multi-stakeholder partnerships as important vehicles for mobilizing and sharing knowledge, expertise, technologies and financial resources to support the achievement of the sustainable development goals.²

A framework for United Nations engagement with business has been in place since 2000. It was most recently updated in 2015³ and reflects core elements of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.⁴ In line with this framework, many UN agencies, funds and programmes have engaged with the business sector through global and local implementation partnerships on humanitarian or development projects, corporate sustainability initiatives, advocacy and outreach campaigns, and innovation and resource mobilization partnerships with a view to more effectively advancing their mandates. Following this UN wide trend, UN Human Rights is seeking to enhance its own engagement with the business sector.

2. Pillars for engagement with the business sector

Within the overall framework of the Guidelines for a Principle-Based Approach to Cooperation between the United Nations and the Business Sector, our objectives for engagement with business are one or more of the following:

- I. Promoting implementation by business of their human rights responsibility and enabling effective accountability for business-related human rights abuse. The foundation for this work is the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.
- II. Working with business on human rights advocacy, as appropriate, to leverage its voice and influence in support of shared objectives on specific themes globally or in-country, e.g. to promote work place diversity (LGBTI; gender; persons with disabilities) and to speak up on behalf of human rights defenders at risk of persecution.
- III. Collaborating with business on specific project activities, which may involve the provision of pro-bono expertise, services or financial support for our work.

¹ GA Resolution: A/RES/55/215 from 2001

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?page=view&type=111&nr=8666&menu=35>

² <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdinaction>

³ http://www.un.org/ar/business/pdf/Guidelines_on_UN_Business_Cooperation.pdf

⁴ http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/GuidingPrinciplesBusinessHR_EN.pdf, endorsed by the Human Rights Council in Resolution 17/4.

Engagement between UN Human Rights and the business sector can take place at different levels and with varying levels of formality and depth. The Office routinely involves business as a stakeholder in global policy discussions relevant to business and provides advice and guidance as appropriate.

In addition, UN Human Rights pursues more formalised partnerships with business where doing so can advance its mandate to promote and protect human rights. As is the case with all our activities, our engagement with business is done with a view to advancing human rights.

2. Principles for engagement with the business sector

UN Human Rights engagement with the business sector must be pursued in a manner that is compatible with international human rights standards, and guided by fundamental principles, including, the following:

- **Shared values, principles and goals:** UN Human Rights seeks deepened engagement with business entities who are committed to core UN values, principles and goals, including the responsibility to respect human rights set out in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.
- **Integrity and independence:** UN Human Rights only engages with business entities where such engagement does not compromise the organization's integrity, credibility, independence and impartiality. UN Human Rights is committed to ensuring that its engagement with business does not limit its ability to speak up against human rights abuses anywhere, to make its own policy decisions, or in any other way that goes against the values of the organization.
- **Accountability:** Partnership agreements involving UN Human Rights have to provide for clear and efficient procedures to ensure the accountability of the partners, of the partnership itself as well as the external accountability of the partnership to citizens, donors and stakeholders.
- **Transparency:** UN Human Rights must be transparent about its approach to engagement with the business sector. While at all times adhering to the UN-wide *Guidelines for a Principle-Based Approach to Cooperation with the Business Sector*, the key features of an Office-specific policy framework guiding its engagements with business will be made publicly available⁵, as will an overview of any formalised engagements.
- **Diversity of engagement:** Actors from a variety of sectors and industries have the opportunity to engage with UN Human Rights, subject to their commitment to human rights and the added value of their contribution to our mandate, and within the parameters of this Policy and the United Nations Guidelines on engagement with the business sector. No engagement should provide exclusivity or imply endorsement or preference of a particular business sector entity, its products or services.
- **Due diligence:** Before engaging in a formalised partnership, UN Human Rights performs a thorough due diligence analysis of the potential partner to screen for actual or potential human rights issues or any other issue relevant to the decision to enter into a partnership.

In all engagement with business, UN Human Rights and its staff must adhere to applicable UN policies and principles on integrity and ethics, including the strict avoidance of any conflict of interest and of accepting gifts and remuneration.

⁵ The policy is currently being revised.