

Third annual UN Forum on Business and Human Rights

Summary note: 'Putting the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights into practice: Perspectives from companies, NGOs and trade unions'

Date: Monday 1 December 2014, 10:00am to 11:30am

Room number: IX

Moderator: Esme Gibbins (Ethical Trading Initiative)

Participants: Philip Chamberlain (C&A), Meena Varma (Dalit Solidarity Network UK), Monika Kemperle (IndustriALL Global Union)

SESSION SUMMARY:

The Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI), together with its members, held a forum on the challenges and opportunities of putting the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) into practice. The session drew on the expertise and experience of ETI's diverse membership base of companies, trade unions and NGOs, providing an interactive forum for debate and discussion. Participants heard three practical case studies, presented by ETI members, which each related to one pillar of the UNGPs (Protect, Respect and Remedy).

Presentation 1: Protecting garment workers in Cambodia

Brand engagement with the Cambodian government over workers' rights issues was the topic of the first case study. This is a recent example of how companies can play a role in helping states uphold their duty to protect human rights. Philip Chamberlain, Head of External Stakeholder Engagement at C&A, was part of an ETI-supported delegation of brands and trade unions that met with the Cambodian government in 2014. The group articulated support for the Cambodian textile industry and the shared need to address human rights issues. Mr Chamberlain said this engagement had helped pave the way for two important outcomes – suspended sentences for 23 detained Cambodian garment workers arrested during protests in January 2014, and a 28% raise in the monthly minimum wage. Some key lessons learned were that the government was prepared to listen and respond; business leverage can be effective; and that the best approach is as part of a multi-stakeholder group.

Presentation 2: Respecting sandstone workers in Rajasthan

Meena Varma, Director of Dalit Solidarity Network UK presented a case study on the Respect pillar. Her organisation campaigns to put an end to caste discrimination worldwide, highlighting the issues facing Dalits in India, who are so often an 'invisible workforce'. Meena looked at ETI's programme in the Rajasthan sandstone sector, where she lends NGO perspectives and insights into the issues facing workers in this arid Indian state. There are two million workers engaged in mining across India, with approximately 90% being informal workers. ETI's programme engages directly with stone processing factories and key local stakeholders, working alongside industry to strengthen its capacity to deal with business and human rights issues. The programme puts the UNGPs into practice through 1) research and advocacy with local government, 2) raising awareness and promoting due diligence, resources and capacity with businesses, and 3) advocating for adequate health and safety standards and establishing effective grievance mechanisms. ETI has witnessed a shift in attitude from within the Rajasthan sandstone industry, and greater willingness to work with civil society to tackle existing workers' rights issues. This is important to the long-term sustainability of these collective efforts.

Presentation 3: Providing remedy for Bangladeshi garment workers

The final case study was presented by Monika Kemperle, Assistant General Secretary at IndustriALL Global Union, and focused on the garment sector in Bangladesh. The 2013 Rana Plaza incident, which led to more than 1,100 deaths and 2,500 injured, has changed the international approach to this sector. Part of this change came in the form of the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety, a five-year binding contract with 189 brands, which foresaw: 1) hiring independent chief inspectors of factories (who would eventually come up with a list of 83,000 cases of non-conformity practices with safety regulations) and 2) promoting workers' participation. However this presentation's main focus was on the process for establishing an internationally-recognised remediation fund for victims, and the detailed discussions between brands, unions and NGOs. The Rana Plaza Donors Trust Fund was finalised in January 2014, and many international brands have contributed donations to it. The establishment of a compensation committee and the implementation of this remediation fund were important steps towards transparency.

COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS

The panel welcomed audience questions at the conclusion of the presentations. One audience member raised the question of whether labour rights is too narrow a lens through which to view business' broader human rights obligations. Trade union colleagues in the room commended collaborative, multi-stakeholder efforts, but lay down the challenge to companies to not lose sight of their individual responsibilities.

CLOSING REMARKS

Philip Chamberlain noted that the industry has changed following the Rana Plaza disaster and highlighted the importance of businesses pulling in other international organisations, governments and manufacturers. Only a collective effort will result in

change. Meena Varma referred to ETI's European predominance and the need to lobby the global south at the national, regional and international levels. Finally, Monika Kemperle noted that many changes in legislation were in the pipeline, which required followed-up to ensure effective improvement in workers' conditions.

ABOUT ETI

The UK-based Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) was the principal organiser for this side event. ETI is a leading alliance of companies, trade unions and NGOs that promotes respect for workers' rights around the globe. Its vision is a world where all workers are free from exploitation and discrimination, and enjoy conditions of freedom, security and equity. For more information please visit: www.ethicaltrade.org