Business and human rights – towards a decade of global implementation
Input by the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

The UK government strongly backs the business and human rights agenda, and has consistently supported the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs). In 2013, the UK was the first state to produce a National Action Plan to implement the UNGPs. The National Action Plan was reviewed and updated in 2016, reaffirming the UK's commitment to this agenda.

The National Action Plan follows the same structure as the UNGPs, based around three pillars. Recent developments in the UK's approach are set out below:

Pillar One: Duty of the state to protect human rights

In order to give effect to this duty, the UK government has:

1. Introduced the Modern Slavery Act 2015. This both updated the law and introduced a requirement for businesses with a turnover of £36 million or more to publish a statement on their website, setting out what steps the business has taken to ensure that modern slavery is not taking place in its business and supply chains. In September 2020, the government announced measures to strengthen the reporting requirements on businesses, and this was followed by a commitment to introduce financial penalties for non-compliance. The government is also launching a modern slavery statement registry in 2021 to enhance transparency and provide increased visibility of the steps which organisations are taking to prevent modern slavery and to empower investors, consumers, and civil society to scrutinise the action which businesses are taking.

2. Launched the Modern Slavery Assessment Tool. This supports public bodies in assessing their own supply base for modern slavery risks, and provides tailored recommendations to suppliers on how to improve their anti-slavery processes.

3. Published a Policy Procurement Note and detailed guidance document, setting out a risk-based approach to mitigating modern slavery in government supply chains, and specific measures to be adopted at each stage of the commercial life-cycle.

4. Published its first 'Government Modern Slavery Transparency Statement' in March 2020, to explain how the UK government guards against modern slavery in its procurement and supply arrangements.

5. Implemented the requirements of the OECD 2012 common approaches for undertaking environmental and social due diligence. These requirements are to identify, consider, and address the potential environmental and social impacts and risks relating to applications for officially supported export credits, as an integral part of decision-making and risk management systems.

6. Worked to raise awareness and increase the impact of the Voluntary Principles Initiative (see the 2019 update report on GOV.UK). The Voluntary Principles Initiative advances the implementation of the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights, through guidance on responsible business practices to oil, gas, and mining companies, which often operate in high-risk and conflict-affected areas.

7. Continued to work closely with the UK Private Security Company (PSC) sector through the Security in Complex Environments Group, which provides a valuable forum to strengthen further industry standards for UK-based PSCs operating internationally.

8. Developed partnerships with other countries seeking to implement UNGPs.

9. Strengthened international rules relating to digital surveillance.

Pillar Two: Government expects business to respect human rights

 To support practical action by businesses, the UK government has:

1. Amended and subsequently strengthened the Companies Act 2006, to require certain companies to report on material human rights impacts, where relevant for an understanding of the business, as part of their annual reports. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has been assessing early experience with these changes to strategic reporting by companies, which were introduced a while ago. Research examining stakeholder perceptions of the non-financial reporting regime since the changes were made was published in October 2019.

2. Provided guidance to companies on the transparency in supply chains requirement of the Modern Slavery Act, and launched a contacts database for businesses to register for tools and resources to support effective reporting under the Act.

3. Partnered with the cyber growth partnership industry guidance on accessing human rights risks relating to cyber security exports.

4. Provided funding for the Corporate Human Rights Benchmark Initiative, a private sector initiative that seeks to rank the largest companies in the world on their human rights performance.

5. Supported the UNGPs' Reporting Framework, a voluntary, comprehensive guide for companies to report on how they respect human rights.

6. Continued to update and promote the government's Overseas Business Risk (OBR) service, providing information about business environments in the countries where UKTI has a presence.

7. Continued to provide financial support to the UN Global Compact. This encourages and enables companies to align their operations and strategies with universally accepted principles on human rights, labour, environment, and anti-corruption.

 Pillar Three: Access to remedy for human rights abuses by businesses

 To support access to remedy for human rights abuses by businesses, the UK government has:

1. Tasked our trade promotion teams, in the markets where they operate, to advise UK companies on establishing or participating in grievance mechanisms, and collaborating with local authorities where necessary.

2. Encouraged companies to extend effective grievance mechanisms to their overseas operations.

3. Supported projects through the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's human rights and democracy programme fund to work on remedy procedures in other countries.

4. Commissioned an independent survey of the UK provision of access to remedy.

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