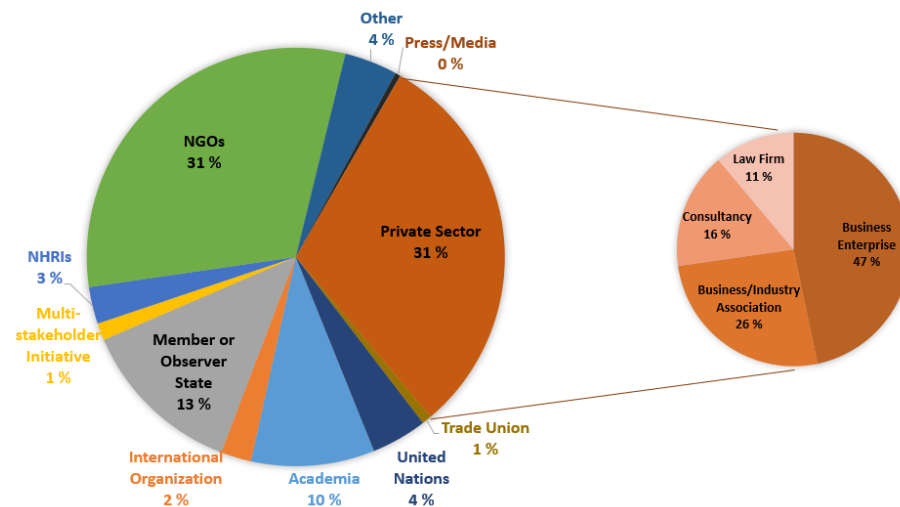


UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights: December 2019 Newsletter

The [UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights](#) would like to thank stakeholders who participated in its activities in 2019 and invite everyone to engage in 2020! A few highlights from the end of this year and for the coming one:

2019 UN Forum on Business and Human Rights (Geneva, 25-27 November)

The annual Forum guided and chaired by the Working Group once again attracted a 2,000+ crowd of participants from different backgrounds. This year's event brought together over 2,400 participants from more than 130 countries, representing governments, businesses, civil society and community groups, national human rights institutions, and international organizations.



For the first time, more than 30 percent of participants came from the private sector.

The programme included more than 60 sessions on current and emerging business-related human rights issues, and under the title *“Time to act: Governments as catalysts for business respect for human rights”*, states – as well as business –

were urged to move from paper to practice in implementing the “Protect, Respect and Remedy” pillars of the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#).

Key messages

There was a widely shared urgency of the need to make progress in protecting and respecting the human rights of workers, communities and human rights defenders whose rights and freedoms are adversely affected or at risk due to irresponsible business and government practices and lack of accountability. Indigenous peoples' representatives, human rights defenders, civil society organizations, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Working Group and other UN experts emphasized the alarming situation for defenders – including women human rights defenders – as attacks to silence those speaking up against business-related human rights abuse continue unabated through killings, legal harassment and other forms of threats, against a backdrop of shrinking civic space across regions. Speakers, including from trade unions, ILO, UN, civil society and business organizations called for the need to act to end modern slavery and child labour in global supply chains, as millions of victims suffer from abuse often with no access to remedy. The growing risks to human rights arising in the context of new technologies and the climate crisis and the need for government and business action to prevent

large-scale impacts were among the key messages underlined by a range of participants. The opening remarks of both [the High Commissioner](#) and [the Working Group](#) acknowledged that pioneering regional organizations, states, businesses and investors are showing that good practice is possible, but also that a lot more is needed, as the majority of governments and businesses in all regions are not meeting their respective duties and responsibilities under the UN Guiding Principles. There were consistent calls across stakeholder groups for governments to step up. Civil society organizations but also some governments and business organizations and investors, backed the call for a better “smart mix” of measures, not least the need for mandatory human rights due diligence legislation. The [need for policy coherence](#) was also highlighted, with speakers underlining, among other things, that states need to lead by example in their roles as economic actors and that national action plans on business and human rights can be powerful tools for more coherent attempts to prevent and address business-related human rights challenges (noting that aside from some recent positive developments, too few states are developing such plans).

Demonstrating that positive action is possible amid a very serious situation, Forum discussions on human rights defenders also featured examples of good practice by governments, business, investors and financial institutions to prevent and address attacks against defenders who raise concerns about business-related impacts. Civil society



organizations and human rights defenders recognized that some governments and business are taking steps in the right direction. In a follow-up from the Forum, the Working Group together with the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders and several non-governmental organizations [issued a joint statement to call for action to protect defenders](#) who speak up against business impact on people and planet, while recognizing several positive examples.

Working Group focus

As the Forum seeks to facilitate dialogue not only on trends and challenges, but as importantly on solutions, sessions focused on practical implications of the “Protect, Respect and Remedy” pillars in relation to a wide range of issues. The Working Group led discussions to unpack what the Guiding Principles require in practice in relation to its current thematic focus areas. This included broad aspects of government and business policy tools or areas, such as [state national action plans](#), [the state as an economic actor](#) (including state-owned enterprises and the areas of trade promotion and development finance), [international investment agreements](#), the [role of national human rights institutions](#) and [corporate human rights due diligence](#). It also included exploring cross-cutting issues such as [gender](#), [sustainable development and access to remedy](#) as well as the connections between business and human rights and key topics such as [corruption](#), [human rights defenders](#), and [conflict](#). In addition to the thematic discussions, the Working Group also convened regionally focused sessions to facilitate multi-stakeholder dialogue on challenges, lessons learned and ways forward to achieve progress in each region. This included dialogues focused on each of the UN regions (Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Western Europe and “Others” group) as well as sub-regional dialogues focused on the Middle East and North Africa and the Pacific Islands region.

A full summary report from the Working Group will be published in the first half of 2020 and presented to the UN Human Rights Council in June.

Engagement opportunities in 2020

As the Working Group continues to pursue its mandate to promote the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights worldwide, it will be undertaking a wide range of activities throughout 2020. It welcomes active

participation and contributions from all relevant stakeholders, including governments, academics, business enterprises and organizations, civil society organizations, human rights defenders, indigenous peoples' organizations, investors, national human rights institutions, regional and international organizations, trade unions and UN experts and organizations.

The Working Group's thematic report to the UN Human Rights Council in June will address the [connection between anti-corruption and business and human rights](#). It will seek to clarify how the Guiding Principles and anti-corruption efforts relate to each other, to demonstrate how measures to drive responsible business practice along these two dimensions can reinforce each other, and what it would imply in practical terms for government and business action. A call for inputs to inform the report will be issued in early 2020.



The thematic report to the UN General Assembly in October will identify practical steps that States and business enterprises as well as public and private investors should take to implement the Guiding Principles in conflict and post-conflict contexts. The background is the realization that the worst forms of business-related human rights abuse tend to happen in such contexts and that a better understanding of the practical measures that all actors should take is still needed. All [interested parties have been invited to submit relevant information](#) before 10 April.

As part of its mandate, the Working Group undertakes two country visits per year. The country visits for 2020 will be announced shortly, and stakeholders will be invited to provide relevant information to the Working Group. In 2019, the Working Group visited [Georgia](#) and [Honduras](#), and detailed reports with recommendations to the governments and business will be presented at the Human Rights Council in June.

In collaboration with UN and international organizations, the Working Group also seeks to promote regional dialogues to the top. It will convene regional events in South Asia (Kathmandu, 18-20 March, in collaboration with UNDP) and in Latin America and the Caribbean (8-9 September, venue to be confirmed; linked to the ongoing [joint project on responsible business conduct](#) in the region implemented by ILO, OECD and OHCHR). These regional events will build on those held in 2019 ([Santiago](#) and [New Dehli](#)).

The Working Group will continue to promote the Guiding Principles in global governance fora, such as [G20](#), and to [connect business and human rights with the Sustainable Development Agenda](#).

2020 UN Forum on Business and Human Rights

The 2020 Forum will take place in Geneva on 16-18 November. In line with the Forum's mandate it will continue to address trends and challenges in implementing the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. A major focus in 2020 will be the need for *prevention* of business-related human rights impacts, connecting with key global challenges such as tackling climate change, fighting corruption, confronting risks posed by new technologies and building sustainable peace, as well strengthening accountability and effective access to remedy as a critical element for prevention of human rights abuses.



A call for input and information about how to engage will be issued in early 2020.

Stay in touch

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