

2022 United Nations Responsible Business and Human Rights Forum: Harnessing Levers of Change

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Background

The adoption of the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) by the Human Rights Council in 2011 proved to be an inflection point in advancing business respect for human rights and corporate accountability. The UNGPs are considered an authoritative, normative framework guiding States and businesses in preventing and addressing business-related adverse impacts on human rights.

Since the adoption of the UNGPs, various governments have developed national action plans on business and human rights (NAPs) outlining their strategies to promote responsible business practices. In the Asia-Pacific region, Thailand, Japan and Pakistan formally adopted their stand-alone NAPs in 2019, 2020, and 2021, respectively. Other countries are currently in the process of developing NAPs, including India, Indonesia, Malaysia, The Maldives, Mongolia, Nepal and Viet Nam.

In recent years, there has also been a strong push to realize the so-called “smart mix of measures” by moving from voluntary towards mandatory initiatives, notably around human rights due diligence. Mandatory human rights due diligence legislation has been adopted or is in development in various European countries. Moreover, the European Commission recently published a proposal for a Directive on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence which envisages European Union-wide obligations for businesses to address their adverse human rights and environmental impacts. Similarly, the United States and other jurisdictions are passing or implementing legislation that prevents the import of goods produced with forced labor. These and other mandatory measures can have far-reaching implications for the region. And although none of these standards, policies and legislations may be perfect, they reflect the progressive evolution of responsible business concepts into more durable norms. Moreover, while the uptake of responsible business practices by businesses has been modest and uneven, observers note shifting business attitudes.

At the same time, a degree of scepticism remains among affected rights holders and civil society actors about the real-life impact of top-down strategies and measures to promote responsible business, in effect spotlighting the need for meaningful participation of rights holders in State and business-led initiatives. The 3rd UN Responsible Business and Human Rights Forum in June 2021 reflected on this need as well as the deeply rooted vulnerabilities and inequalities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly for women, children, informal workers, migrant workers, displaced persons, refugees, older persons, people with disabilities, indigenous peoples and human rights defenders. It further highlighted the need to view the crisis as an opportunity to drive meaningful change reflected in concrete policies at the national level. The global Covid-19 pandemic has reversed hard-fought progress on various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

across the Asia-Pacific region, including SDG 8 on decent work, SDG 5 on gender equality, and SDG 10 on reduced inequalities, among others. Furthermore, according to a recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, global emissions need to peak by 2025 if global warming is to be kept below 1.5°C. To ensure climate justice and address the triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss, States and businesses must step up action before ecosystems fail. Sadly, UN Secretary-General Antonio Gutierrez recently cautioned that “[s]ome government and business leaders are saying one thing, but doing another.” In addition to these and other challenges, rights holders face additional adverse impacts related to shrinking civic space, harassment and threats against human rights defenders, corruption, informal employment and corporate capture of processes and institutions designed to improve the lives of rights holders.

Thus, while the uptake of responsible business by a range of different actors in recent years is encouraging, much more is needed to make a difference in the daily lives of people who disproportionately face adverse impacts of business activity. Against this background, the 4th UN Responsible Business and Human Rights Forum provides an opportunity to reflect on the “levers of change” at our disposal and how they can be harnessed to strengthen corporate accountability and responsible business.

About the Responsible Business and Human Rights Forum

Held annually since 2019, the Responsible Business and Human Rights Forum convenes different stakeholders in the Asia-Pacific region, including governments, civil society organizations, human rights defenders, trade unions, academia, international organizations, national human rights institutions, business enterprises, industry associations, journalists, lawyers, activists and campaigners for constructive dialogue and peer-learning on how to strengthen responsible business and corporate accountability in the region. Under the theme “Harnessing Levers of Change”, the 4th UN Responsible Business and Human Rights Forum will explore what has worked to promote business respect for human rights and the environment and what has not, challenges and opportunities, as well as what novel strategies can be employed to accelerate progress in this domain with the participation of different stakeholders across the region.

The Forum will be held on 20–22 September 2022, and co-organized by the International Labour Organization (ILO), International Organization for Migration (IOM), Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), and the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights (UNWG).

Objectives

The Forum aims to:

- Take stock of progress and discuss challenges in promoting responsible business practices in the Asia-Pacific region, and explore lessons learned;

- Reflect and build on the lessons learned to scale up progress on responsible business and showcase innovative strategies to that effect;
- Promote collaboration and networking among a wide range of stakeholders, including rights holders, governments, businesses and industry associations, national human rights institutions, civil society organizations, trade unions, human rights defenders, academia, lawyers, and journalists.

Programme

The Forum programme will be made available on www.rbhrforum.com by the end of June. The Forum will be held in person in Bangkok, Thailand, as well as live-streamed online.

Queries

For general queries, please reach out to the Forum Secretariat at unrbhrforum@undp.org. For queries related to sessions and speakers, please contact Harpreet Kaur, Business and Human Rights Specialist, UNDP (harpreet.kaur@undp.org), with a copy to Kevin Lehmann, Business and Human Rights Analyst, UNDP (kevin.lehmann@undp.org).