

The Business Leaders Initiative on Human Rights

An Overview

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Founded in May 2003, The Business Leaders Initiative on Human Rights is chaired by Mary Robinson, the former President of Ireland and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and is presently made up of 10 international companies: ABB, Barclays, Gap Inc., Hewlett Packard, MTV Networks Europe, National Grid, Novartis, Novo Nordisk, The Body Shop International and Statoil.

1. Why was BLIHR established?

In its first report, BLIHR sets out its principle aims:

“Our intention is to find practical ways of applying the aspirations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights within a business context and to inspire other businesses to do likewise.”¹

The companies believe that human rights offer several *a priori* advantages over other approaches to corporate responsibility:

- *Universalism* - all member states of the United Nations are party to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the provisions of this agreement apply anywhere in the world regardless of location or business focus.
- *Multi-stakeholder engagement* – they are a framework accepted by many communities, trade unions, NGOs, Governments and increasingly also investors and multi-lateral agencies. They also therefore provide a framework for sustainable partnerships;
- *Legitimacy* – closely linked to the above is the fact that human rights provide a more objective framework than one devised by business alone;

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¹ Business Leaders Initiative on Human Rights: Report 1: Getting Started, BLIHR, London, New York and Stockholm: 2003. www.blihr.org.

- *Cross-cutting* – they can relate to all business operations. Human rights are not just about meeting national regulations but also about the opportunities that business might identify and relates as much to the desirable leadership any business can show as it does to any culture of compliance.

BLIHR will have achieved its mission when it has demonstrated the practical applications of human rights across a broad range of business contexts, both sectorally and geographically. In order to achieve this, BLIHR is clear that it should remain business-led but also work through a large number of partners: the United Nations, CSR networks, Business Associations, NGOs, national governments, international institutions and trade unions.

2. What does BLIHR hope to achieve?

BLIHR has set out to demonstrate that human rights are as much an opportunity as an issue of compliance. The interesting questions for any business are:

- (1) What is the *minimum* that should be *expected* of any business in terms of human rights? (What must or mustn't a business do?);
- (2) What are the reasonable *expectations* that investors, employees or society might have of a particular company or business sector to go beyond the minimum?
- (3) What would be really *desirable* of business – in terms of partnerships and other proactive actions?

There are also the questions business has to ask in order to understand their commitments to the first two principles of The United Nations Global Compact³: how to support and respect the protection of human rights within its sphere of influence and remain non-complicit in the abuses perpetrated by others. Collectively, BLIHR has developed a human rights matrix based on the content of “The Norms”⁴ and companies in each of these sectors have used the matrix as a strategic tool for mapping the human rights content of their ‘sphere of influence’ and prioritising the essential, expected and desirable actions they might undertake.

In order to investigate these issues and identify the understandings required, BLIHR also takes a sector-specific approach involving other companies from the respective business sectors. For example:

- A contemporary challenge for the Pharmaceutical sector is to define how the ‘right to health’ lies within its sphere of influence and the provision of essential medicines;
- Utility and engineering companies might look at needs of ‘vulnerable customers’ and the role that water and electricity play in underpinning economic and social rights, in particular in Africa;

³ www.unglobalcompact.org.

⁴ “Norms on the Responsibilities of Transnational Corporations and Other Business Enterprises with Regard to Human Rights” (Norms), developed by a United Nations expert group, the UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights.

- The financial sector can look at how best to integrate human rights into their existing work through the Equator Principles;
- The extractive sector can look at the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights but also the need to refer to human rights in Host Government Agreements;
- Retailers can continue the focus on the supply chain but look at the wider impact of their purchasing policy has on small and medium-sized enterprises in the South or the impact their collective procurement has on specific commodities, livelihoods and the environment;
- The international media, now nominated by six global companies, needs to find ways of remaining accountable to fundamental rights such as ‘freedom of expression’ and the ‘protection of the vulnerable’ in both its ‘on-air’ and ‘off-air’ activities.

3. What have been BLIHR’s contributions so far and challenges to come?

The Human Rights Matrix developed by BLIHR has been used by a broader range of businesses as a diagnostic and strategic mapping tool. The ‘road-testing of human rights’ was work in progress communicated in the 2004 BLIHR report⁵ and will culminate in the next report scheduled to appear in March 2006.

The next step is to show that human rights can be integrated into methodology of business management systems, regardless of how large the business is or where in the world it is based. In December 2005, we have launched a ‘Guide for Integrating Human Rights into Business Management Systems’ in partnership with The United Nations Global Compact and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights⁶. This is a draft for consultation which we hope will draw in the experiences of a much wider business community around the world.

BLIHR has two fundamental challenges for its second three-year period, 2006-2009. First, to drill down into the management systems of specific companies and develop the indicators and monitoring mechanisms appropriate for allowing a business to understand its relationship with human rights and the actions that might be possible. The second is to build on its work in communicating the advantages of human rights to a wider society of businesses, in particular those in emerging markets and the developing world. We will continue to work closely with the UN Special Representative on Business and Human Rights and all other experts and networks in order to help mainstream human rights within the global business community.

⁵ Business Leaders Initiative on Human Rights: Report 2: Work in Progress, BLIHR, London, New York and Stockholm: 2004. www.blihr.org.

⁶ www.ohchr.org.