

94 Companies & 41 Governments Publicly Disclose Actions on Business & Human Rights

LONDON, Feb. 25 /CSRwire/ - New interactive platforms launched today reveal how companies and governments are addressing human rights impacts of business, finding that while there are many inspirational examples of action, much more needs to be done.---

Business & Human Rights Resource Centre approached over 100 governments and 180 companies with specific questions on their business and human rights policies and actions. 52% of companies and 40% of governments responded. From the results, it is clear that the endorsement of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights has catalysed action, but there remains a lack of understanding and cohesive action between government and business.

Phil Bloomer, Business & Human Rights Resource Centre Executive Director said: "Our new action platforms will drive essential government and corporate action on business and human rights by increasing transparency and sharing good practice. This is the first free public website where anyone can compare action on business and human rights by 94 companies and 41 governments."

Companies from all regions responded, including Coca-Cola, CNOOC (China National Offshore Oil Corporation), and Telefónica. Many respondents noted that complex supply chains and weak government enforcement present challenges to their respect for human rights. Among the most common actions companies said they are taking were policy commitments, external reporting, and engaging suppliers. 34 of the world's largest 50 companies now have a publicly-available policy statement on human rights.

There was particularly poor engagement from the retail and apparel sector where only 25% responded, mostly apparel companies. State-owned extractive companies also failed to respond in many cases. The highest response rate was from the food & beverage sector (73%).

The European Union led the way on government engagement with 71% of EU member states responding. Many governments already active on business and human rights issues responded (Brazil, Norway, Germany, USA) and it was promising to see responses from countries in the initial phases of policy development in this area (Angola, Bahrain, Israel, Japan, Myanmar).

There is momentum among governments to develop National Action Plans on business and human rights. Although there are currently only four governments with such plans (Denmark, Finland, Netherlands, UK), more than a dozen have indicated that they are developing or considering developing a National Action Plan. Most governments cited legislative actions in steps they have taken. Relatively few governments recognised extraterritorial jurisdiction as a means to protect human rights from business impacts. Government respondents most commonly cited lack of awareness and challenges in coordination across ministries.

Several governments with large economic footprints failed to engage with this process (Canada, China, India, Russia). Canadian and Russian companies also failed to respond, and there was low response from Indian (29%) and Chinese (26%) companies. This trend is disappointing as transparency is key to improve both government and company actions.

Both government and company respondents reported taking positive, substantive actions. These include mandatory reporting requirements on various human rights issues in Denmark, France, UK, USA and elsewhere, and efforts by some companies to conduct human rights impact assessments in the countries where they operate, and establish clear processes for receiving complaints.

Joint action needed

While companies noted significant challenges resulting from governance gaps, several governments cited opposition by business interests as an obstacle. This mismatch highlights that governments and companies are at best not cooperating, and at worst avoiding responsibility by pointing the finger at each other.

Alongside each company and government profile are related stories from civil society and the media. The platforms seek to strengthen accountability as well as transparency. They feature practical steps that can be shared; highlight companies and governments that are not yet engaging; and provide information that human rights defenders can use to hold companies to account.

Annabel Short, Programme Director and project manager of the Company Action Platform said: “Any company looking for long-term success in the face of major social and environmental challenges needs to take human rights seriously. We encourage companies in all regions to take action and share their progress publicly.”

Eniko Horvath, project manager of the Government Action Platform said: “With several National Action Plan processes underway, governments should seize the opportunity to share experiences and ensure their plans are not only strong on paper, but deliver effective protection and remedies worldwide.”

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The Government Action Platform was made possible by a grant from the United Kingdom Foreign & Commonwealth Office. The Company Action Platform was made possible by a grant from by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development, supported by GIZ.

The Resource Centre is a member of the Corporate Human Rights Benchmark (CHRB) Steering Group. The process and results from the Company Action Platform will be taken into account in the development of the methodology for the CHRB, which is underway. The CHRB Steering Group is: Aviva Investors; Business & Human Rights Resource Centre; Calvert Investments; EIRIS; The Institute for Human Rights and Business; and VBDO.

Business and Human Rights Resource Centre is an international NGO that tracks the human rights impacts (positive & negative) of over 6000 companies in over 180 countries making information available on its eight language website. We seek responses from companies when concerns are raised by civil society. The response rate is over 70% globally.

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πηγή: CSRwire

25/02/2015