

The Future Research Agenda for Business and Human Rights – Towards an Integration of Perspectives and Improved Measurements

Nicole Janz, Adriana Orellana, Rocio Robinson, and Jordi Vives i Gabriel¹

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According to international law, states are the main duty bearers of human rights. However, in many areas, weaker states are not capable of protecting human rights effectively. Here, multinationals are often more powerful; and the argument has been brought forward that they might be able to step in and foster human rights. At the same time, gross human rights violations and instances of complicity by businesses are reported in the media every day.

To bring more light into this debate, an interdisciplinary focus workshop, “Human Rights Responsibilities of MNCs in the Developing World”, convened in June 7-8, 2012 in St Gallen, Switzerland. It was organized by the human rights group within the Transatlantic Doctoral Academy on Corporate Responsibility (TADA). The discussions enabled the development of research questions and research agenda formulated by the organizing committee in this discussion paper. We propose that future research on business and human rights should work towards an integration of perspectives and improved measurements.

1. **Take a more integrated, multi-disciplinary and theory-practice perspective.** The interdisciplinary nature of the human rights and business debate requires networks and transfers of knowledge on all levels and disciplines. Participants of this workshop had a background in law, philosophy, business ethics, political science and practice. Interdisciplinary collaborations that include stakeholders and practitioners are most likely to bring light into the complex debate.
2. **Utilize theories, frameworks and ideas.** The connection between theory and practice needs to be strengthened. Theoretical work on business ethics should be incorporated into empirical research and policy more rigorously. For that purpose, conceptual clarity is key. This includes the development of useful hypotheses that can be the basis for further empirical research and that are understandable for policy makers and practitioners. There is a risk of upholding current ambiguity in the debate if there is no balance between a theoretical and a more pragmatic approach to the business and human rights discussion.

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3. **Voluntary standards must lead to hard law.** Effective mechanisms to ensure respect and protection of human rights in the private sector are crucial. This needs go past the stage of voluntary initiatives, which have paved the way in the last years, towards binding standards (rules and regulation, accountability tools, inclusion of CSR into decision making processes). There is a clear need to advocate the respect and the protection of human rights for businesses in a rigorous way. To achieve mainstreaming of rights issues into core business, effective means and tools to improve advocacy need to be developed.
4. **For human rights advocacy, measurement is key.** Quantitative measurement of human rights protection, CSR commitment and general impact of business on communities needs to be further developed. Existing research on adherence to standards, initiatives' participation, but also the impact of business and human rights needs to incorporate not only qualitative narratives, but also clear measurement tools. For example, data of the Global Compact or Business and Human Rights Resource could be re-coded and more systemically analysed. Future research needs to ensure valid, reliable and accessible measurements and foster data comparability to combine quantitative and qualitative research in a more effective way.
5. **Proposed Research Questions:** We suggest that the future debate centers around the following key areas.

Theory

- I. What dimensions of human rights responsibilities "fit" MNCs? What rights should companies as moral agents be responsible for?
- II. How can we formulate ideas about the responsibility to respect and the duty to protect beyond the Ruggie framework?
- III. How can responsibility dimensions be formulated in terms of complicity in countries with repressive governments?
- IV. Can the concept of CSR be an answer to human rights responsibilities of MNCs?

Practice

- V. What can we learn from CSR initiatives in communities in developing countries?
 - VI. What can we learn from practice in specific industries like mining, finance, pharmaceuticals, and food in the developing world?
 - VII. How can we quantify and measure the intensity of CSR strategies and the impact on human rights?
6. **Slight optimism is in order.** The participants of the focus workshop pointed out that there is increasing agreement on many of the points mentioned. The UN Global Compact, the Global Reporting Initiative, and the work of John Ruggie are important milestones. If conceptual clarity as well as measurements and advocacy tools are improved through collaboration among theorists, empirical researchers and practitioners, we can be optimistic that the debate will improve greatly.