

Business | Concrete ways to support human rights defenders

31.08.2018

One of the most important and urgent opportunities for responsible business is to support basic human rights and those who defend them. How can companies take concrete actions to protect human rights defenders and the 'shared space' in which both operate? A groundbreaking new publication by the Business Network on Civic Freedoms and Human Rights Defenders is providing concrete advice to companies.



Published by the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre and the International Service for Human Rights, this [new guidance \(executive summary\)](#) was commissioned by the Business Network on Civic Freedoms and Human Rights Defenders, seeking to encourage companies to focus on an increasingly inescapable agenda.

'Shared space' under pressure

The work of human rights defenders and civil society is vital to peace, justice, fairness and sustainability. It is also essential to promote transparency and combat corruption. Nonetheless, data from around the world shows there is a concerted attack in many countries on the essential freedoms and the rule of law on which business and civil society depend. And the defenders and organisations who expose the risk of abuse by companies in their operations and supply chains are under particular attack.

Business and civil society operate in and benefit from a 'shared space' defined by common, fundamental elements. The rule of law and freedom of expression, association and assembly are essential to the realisation of all human rights, to good governance and accountable institutions. These elements are also critical to stable, profitable and sustainable business environments in which companies thrive and economies prosper. Yet this shared space is as much an ideal as it is a reality.

The strength of the shared space is tested by a history and legacy of mistrust between elements of civil society and business, especially between multinational corporations in certain industries and local communities in the Global South. This mistrust is reflected in actions, whether intentional or inadvertent, by individual companies and even entire industries to undermine civic freedoms and to undercut human rights defenders. It shows up in conflicts and confrontations in almost every region. Yet standards and practices have evolved over the last two decades to encourage or require companies to respect human rights – however incompletely and inconsistently. Moreover, engagement and consultation of companies with local communities and stakeholders are leading to solutions in conflicts in ways that encourage further progress.

'The time is now for responsible business to act to defend civic freedoms and protect human rights defenders', said Michael Ineichen, Programme Director at ISHR.

'This is not just the [expectation of human rights defenders](#), a moral and often a legal imperative - but as the guidance shows, also often in companies' very interest', Ineichen said.

Guidance for companies

But why, when and how should business engage on this urgent agenda? This guidance represents a major step forward towards business action. It is a clear and practical guide to realistic action by responsible companies, investors, industry associations and business leaders. It is informed by pragmatism and the principles of freedom and fair play. It is also the result of over 90 interviews with business leaders, investors, civil society advocates and other international experts who gladly offered their insights.

The document elaborates on why business should be compelled to join civil society and human rights defenders in resisting the crackdown on their work by:

- Providing the complementary normative framework, business case and moral considerations which all encourage companies to support civic freedoms and defenders under threat;
- Elaborating on the main elements of the business case to protect defenders, namely the business interest to secure the shared space, to manage operational and reputational risks, to build competitive advantage, and to secure a social license to operate;
- Outlining a decision framework that is both analytical and operational to determine whether and how to act in various circumstances.

Authored by Bennett Freeman, a leader and innovator in the business and human rights field for two decades, the guidance intends to further push the thinking and debate on how we can forge new alliances to counter the attacks on civic freedoms and human rights defenders and hold open these precious shared spaces. The Business & Human Rights Resource Centre and the International Service for Human Rights look forward to deeper and more powerful collaboration with business and stronger alliances with civil society partners through the publication of this guidance.

Download the full guidance - [Shared space under pressure: business support for civic freedoms and human rights defenders](#)

Download an executive summary - [Shared space under pressure: Executive Summary](#)

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