

A policy framework for better managing business and human rights challenges

One of the main goals of the UN Framework "Protect, Respect and Remedy" is to identify and clarify standards of corporate responsibility and accountability for business enterprises with regard to human rights. Professor John Ruggie, Special Representative of the UN Secretary General on business and human rights, shared insights on the current phase and further steps towards operationalizing and promoting this framework with participants of the 99th ILC. ILO Online spoke with Mr. Ruggie about design and development of the UN Policy Framework and its relationship to ILO's work.

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When you were appointed, what was the business attitude towards human rights issues?

When I was appointed in 2005 the business community found the whole subject of human rights a bit mysterious and even scary. It seemed to be a world without boundaries increasingly held them responsible for things that they didn't think they had responsibility for or didn't know how to manage.

Over the course of time we have demystified the whole issue of human rights and brought it down to a level where it's understandable; for the corporate community, for smaller companies and for managers in terms of very simple responsibilities: not to infringe on the rights of others as they go about their business and the kinds of systems that they need to put in place in order to make sure that that happens.

Why do you believe the topic of business and human rights now attracts such wide spread interest?

There have been emblematic cases that have framed the public understanding and debate whether it's Shell in Nigeria or Nike in Indonesia. Public pressure and advocacy group pressure always helps to introduce new subjects to the public and this is no exception.

But over time also companies, especially large extractive industries, have found increasing pressure from the communities in which they operate and have looked for ways to manage their relationships with communities better. Investors and governments have raised questions and so increasingly this is a subject that business is familiar with and increasingly engaged in.

How do ILO instruments fit within the framework?

The work that the ILO does is of course very important in the context of worker's rights which are overall human rights as well. Because of the existence of the ILO I don't have to spend as much on worker's rights as I otherwise would. So I focus more on issues related to business impact on communities and society as a whole and how these could be more effectively managed.

In my view what's happening is that human rights is today where the environment was 30 years ago. No company had environmental impact assessment then, today almost everybody does. 30 years from now companies will have human rights assessments. In fact many companies already do. It's part of the social evolution of the relationship between business and society that is focused on the need to have sustainable relationships with the physical environment but also with the social environment in which business operates.

In the "protect, respect and remedy" framework, you assign different responsibilities to states and companies – who is ultimately responsible in this model?

The human rights agenda initially was created by states for states and it had institutional mechanisms that were designed to deal with state abuses. Only gradually we have focused on the fact that business is having an enormous impact on human rights. We always understood that in relation to worker's rights but it's taken a bit longer to bring it into the broader social room.