

Supporting practical exchanges among businesses in the Asia Pacific

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The [Global Business Initiative on Human Rights](#) (GBI) and the [World Business Council for Sustainable Development](#) (WBCSD) recently convened two series of online workshops to support companies in South East Asia and India to strengthen their practical know-how on business and human rights.



More than 80 business practitioners from dozens of companies – both national and multinational – participated in the nine workshops in October. Through practical peer learning and hearing directly from leading experts, the workshops supported practitioners to strengthen their understanding of what key standards – and their companies' stakeholders – expect as regards human rights risk management. The workshops also created a space for participants to exchange and discuss their practices, approaches and lessons learned.

COVID-19 has given rise to many challenges for businesses. From a human rights perspective, the pandemic has changed the risk landscape, presenting additional human rights risks relating to health and safety, worker livelihoods and issues relating to migration among others. It has also added practical challenges for companies – in addition to the very real financial pressures, it is simply much more difficult to undertake effective human rights due diligence when movement, in-person gatherings and travel are restricted.

Despite – or perhaps because of – these additional challenges, we perceived a growing need among business practitioners for opportunities to learn more about how to better manage human rights risks and issues.

Priorities for companies in India and South East Asia that emerged from our webinars and discussions include:

- **Strengthening practical knowledge of key standards:** Companies are aware of the growing influence of key standards – including, in particular, the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs). We perceived a strong interest in building greater confidence working with these standards – and scaling familiarity among companies and their stakeholders in the region.
- **Developing training and capability building opportunities:** A high priority is to raise awareness about their company's human rights responsibilities – and what this means in practice. It's not always easy to talk to colleagues about human rights – and some terms need to be demystified, particularly for colleagues more familiar with the language of sustainability and ESG. There's no one right way to approach this, but

participants observed that it's important to unpack key terms using language that will resonate and help colleagues understand what they need to do in practice.

- **Addressing human rights issues in the supply chain:** Finding effective ways to identify and manage human rights issues in the supply chain is also a high priority. As more countries – and the European Union – look to introduce legislation that requires companies to undertake human rights due diligence across their supply chains, the need to demonstrate effective practice to customers, investors and other stakeholders will increase. Participants emphasised that collaborative approaches tend to be more effective than 'policing' or 'compliance' approaches. Working with suppliers can create opportunities for two-way learning. By sharing their own practices with suppliers, companies can not only support capability building but also demonstrate the seriousness of their commitment.
- **Effective approaches to collaboration:** In addition to collaborating with suppliers, companies often need to collaborate with each other and with other stakeholders to address complex and systemic human rights challenges and increase their leverage. It's important to bring the right partners together and be clear about what is to be achieved. Participants emphasised the need to build the 'partnership capability' of all organisations involved to enable them to work together effectively and with the necessary level of trust.

Our discussions with practitioners based in India and South East Asia reinforced the need for companies to focus on building practical know-how at a local, as well as global, level. Human rights expertise is needed on the ground wherever a company operates. In times like these when travel is restricted, companies rely on local expertise, networks and action.

But that's not the only reason to invest in supporting business practitioners at a local or regional level. We often observe that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to human rights risk management. What works for companies in one part of the world may be different to what works well in another.

As one workshop participant observed, companies in the Asia Pacific region can draw on local ways of working and communicating to strengthen – and humanise – their human rights due diligence and help ensure their approach resonates with colleagues and partners.

GBI and WBCSD will continue to support business practitioners in India, South East Asia and in other priority regions to connect with one another to advance their human rights practices.

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