

The UN Guiding Principles for Business and Human Rights as a Framework for Action in Global Textile Supply Chains



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1 Introduction

Rapidly growing and ever more complex business relationships have been a defining feature of globalization to date. On the positive side, such linkages have led to a significant transfer of skills and technologies, better access to a wider range of products and services, and improved efficiency as well as faster growth. As global supply chains map global production processes across numerous countries at different stages of development and with varying degrees of stability, governance, and respect for the rule of law, they can also serve to trace the negative impacts of globalization, including human rights violations.

In the textile industry, as manufacturers increasingly outsource their labour-intensive production to low cost countries with relatively low sustainability and human rights requirements, such negative impacts can refer to wages below the subsistence level, pervasive overtime work, and a glaring absence of occupational health and safety measures, collective bargaining mechanisms, and unionization. Recent examples with devastating consequences, such as the Rana Plaza tragedy in Bangladesh or the Ali Enterprises factory fire in Pakistan, immediately come to mind, but it is also the continued reports of child and forced labour—be it in cotton production, dye-works or in the finishing stages of textile production—that have led to increasing global attention and outrage (Business and Human Right Resource Center 2017a).

With the aim of addressing the negative human rights impacts in the context of global production processes, the UN Guiding Principles for Business and Human Rights (UNGP) focus on global supply chains to clarify the roles and responsibilities of businesses and other stakeholders (OHCHR 2011). Industries with a strong international orientation or participation, e.g. those relating to large infrastructure

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projects (Business and Human Right Resource Center 2017b) or natural resource extraction (Business and Human Right Resource Center 2017c), have long turned to the UNGP for advice on human rights matters. Others, including the textile industry, have only more recently come to embrace the UNGP, possibly fuelled by the previously referenced disasters. In what follows, we therefore explore the provisions of the UNGP to address human rights challenges in global supply chains and discuss, given that they were meant only to provide high-level guidance, through what practical approaches positive impact on the ground could best be obtained.

2 The UNGP as a Global Framework for Business and Human Rights

In 2011, the UNGP were unanimously endorsed by the UN Human Rights Council (UN Human Rights Council 2008; OHCHR 2011). Nowadays, they are widely recognized as the key set of internationally agreed upon norms governing the relationship between states, businesses, and human rights. Besides the approval at the level of nation states and the wide-ranging support from international organizations, business associations and civil society actors, the UNGP are also said to have been “widely taken up by companies as the reference point when implementing human rights considerations into business processes” (CSR Europe et al. 2013; BIAC/ICC/IOE 2011; Oxfam 2013; European Coalition for Corporate Justice 2016). The fact that the UNGP were explicitly taken into account in revising the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises to include a human rights chapter and in updating the Global Reporting Initiative’s (GRI) Sustainability Reporting Guidelines as well as other international corporate social responsibility frameworks further attests to their success (Global Compact Network Germany et al. 2013: 19).

3 From the PRR Framework to the UNGP

The debate surrounding the role of states vs. that of businesses in protecting human rights in a globalized world had, for quite some time, been paralyzed by the seeming impossibility of reconciling legally binding instruments on the one hand with voluntary approaches on the other (Global Compact Network Germany et al. 2013: 15ff). Following the failure of negotiations at the level of the United Nations to create a legally binding human rights instrument to regulate business conduct, Professor John Ruggie, the then appointed UN Special Representative for Business and Human Rights, set out to develop the so-called “Protect, Respect, Remedy” (PRR) Framework that provides the conceptual basis for clarifying the roles and responsibilities of states and business as well as other actors. It comprises three distinct but interrelated pillars:

- *Pillar 1: The State duty to protect* against human rights abuses through appropriate policies or regulation, including abuses potentially caused or contributed to by businesses.
- *Pillar 2: The corporate responsibility to respect* human rights, meaning that businesses are expected to avoid infringing human rights and address negative impacts resulting from or related to their business activities.
- *Pillar 3: Access to remedy*, which refers to the provision of effective grievance mechanisms for victims through states and businesses in case negative impacts on human rights do occur.

Building on this conceptual basis, the UNGP then flesh out the operational implications of the PRR Framework and provide more detailed guidance around the three pillars.

Guiding Principles 1–10 start by describing the state duty to protect human rights. Guiding Principle 1 stipulates, for instance, that “States must protect against human rights abuse within their territory and/or jurisdiction by third parties, including business enterprises”, while Guiding Principle 2 establishes the need for states also to require businesses to respect human rights extraterritorially. Guiding Principles 3–10 then outline in what areas and how states should go about fulfilling their duty to protect human rights. One of the key messages therein urges states to “consider a smart mix of measures—national and international, mandatory and voluntary—to foster business respect for human rights” (UNGP and commentary 3 OHCHR 2011).

Guiding Principles 11–24 address the corporate responsibility to respect human rights, outlining specific considerations as to how businesses could meet that responsibility in practice. The Foundational Principles 11–15 first clarify the scope of that responsibility (all enterprises, all internationally recognized human rights, direct activities and business relationships), with Guiding Principles 15–24 then detailing the concrete steps that businesses should undertake to heed their responsibility, including the requirement to undertake human rights due diligence, the centrality of ensuring access to grievance mechanisms, and the importance of putting in place processes that enable the remediation of any negative human rights impacts.

Last but not least, the Access to Remedy pillar with Guiding Principles 25–31 relates to both state and corporate actions to help victims obtain access to remedy for business-related human rights abuses. Based on the recognition of a shared responsibility to provide support for and compensate victims, the respective principles address diverse types of mechanisms, including state and non-state, judicial and non-judicial mechanisms. They also include eight criteria for non-judicial grievance mechanisms established by businesses or partnerships between businesses and other stakeholders, such as civil society actors, to be considered effective (GP 31).

By explicitly distinguishing between the international legal obligation of states to protect human rights and the moral obligation and broad public expectation that businesses—individually and independently—respect human rights, but also bringing them together in one coherent framework, Prof. Ruggie succeeded in reinvigorating the stalled debate.

4 Guiding Businesses' Responsibility to Respect

As already hinted at, the concept of human rights due diligence lies at the heart of guiding businesses' responsibility to respect human rights. More specifically, the UNGP's second pillar outlines five essential steps businesses should undertake, including making a policy commitment (UNGP 16); undertaking an assessment of human rights-related risks and (potential) human rights impacts; broadly integrating this understanding and these risks into all relevant business processes and levels; and establishing processes to track the effectiveness of actions undertaken to address human rights issues and to communicate results (UNGP 17–21). In terms of scope, the UNGP require businesses to consider (potentially) adverse impacts throughout their entire supply chains with each and every due diligence step (UNGP 13; OHCHR 2011).

5 Policy Commitment

As a first step in fulfilling their responsibility to respect human rights, UNGP 16 expect businesses to issue a high-level public commitment to respect human rights, be it in the form of a specific human rights policy or as part of other existing policies or relevant codes of conduct. Such a commitment should, at a minimum, specify the most critical human rights issues a business is facing and how these are reflected in its corporate policies and processes, including what is expected of its business partners and other entities linked to its operations, products, or services. See UNGP 16 and commentary (OHCHR 2011) and (Langlois 2016) for further guidance on what a company's human rights policy should contain.

6 Human Rights Due Diligence

UNGP 17 states that “in order to identify, prevent, mitigate and account for how they address their adverse human rights impacts, business enterprises should carry out human rights due diligence” (UNGP 17; UNGP 18; OHCHR 2011), which, according to UNGP 18, requires businesses to proactively “identify and assess any actual and potential adverse human rights impacts with which they may be involved either through their own activities or as a result of their business relationships” (UNGP 18; OHCHR 2011). In practice, this means that businesses have to decide whether it is sufficient to carry out a broader risk assessment of how their overall business activity might impact human rights or whether their specific operations might warrant undertaking an in-depth human rights impact assessment.

The main criterion advanced by the UNGP is the degree of riskiness that a potentially severe human rights impact will in fact occur, taking into account aspects

such as the size or dimension of the business venture, the country or sector of operation, a specific product or service as well as other contextual factors (UNGP 17 b and c; OHCHR 2011). UNGP 17 acknowledges that a supply chain may in fact contain so many different entities that a reasonable approach to human rights due diligence in such a context would warrant prioritization of those areas for assessment (operations, products, services, location), where the risk of adverse human rights impacts is highest (UNGP 17; OHCHR 2011).

When it comes to integrating the findings from the risk analyses or impact assessments into business policies or processes, Guiding Principle 19 advocates not only for appropriate processes to be put in place, but also for them to be internally aligned and continually reviewed to match the broader and continuously changing human rights context. This is because adverse human rights impacts can only be avoided, mitigated or effectively dealt with if the analyses or assessments undertaken count on full internal collaboration and if the results are fed back into action in both a horizontal—across departments and operational units—and a vertical manner—from the leadership down to the individual employees.

UNGP 19 also touches on the increasing complexity of dealing with the responsibility to respect in a supply chain context and sets out to provide practical guidance on appropriate business conduct in the context of an adverse or potentially adverse human rights impact, supplementing the decision tree thus far with two further criteria. The first one has to do with the degree to which an enterprise is actually linked to the (potentially) adverse human rights impact. More specifically, the UNGP distinguish between three levels of involvement: a business can cause adverse human rights impacts through its own activities; a business can contribute to such an impact through its own activities; or it can be directly linked to an adverse impact through its business relationships.

In case of an enterprise's activities being a direct cause or contributing to an adverse human rights impact, immediate action to prevent or stop the impact is in order. Where an adverse human rights impact occurs by way of existing business relationships, UNGP 19 stipulates that appropriate action will depend on a number of factors such as “the enterprise's leverage over the entity concerned”, and further, “how crucial the relationship is to the enterprise, the severity of the abuse, and whether terminating the relationship with the entity itself would have adverse human rights consequences” (Commentary to UNGP 19 OHCHR 2011).

The “amount of leverage” or the possibility to exercise it is then the second criterion offered by the UNGP for a business to decide on how to address adverse human rights impacts along its supply chain.¹ If there is leverage, meaning that a business can “effect change in the wrongful practices of the party that is causing or contributing to the impact”, then, according to UNGP 19, it should be applied. Otherwise, an enterprise could, for one thing, try to increase its leverage, possibly by providing more support to its suppliers through capacity building and/or by fostering

¹In other words, impacts that it may have contributed to or been directly linked with (see UNGP 19 and commentary).

partnerships that help to further support or solidify the business relationships along the supply chain. For another, it could attempt to sever the relationship through which the human rights impact has occurred, provided that this is possible and does not bring with it other unwanted and negative human rights impacts (UNGP 19 and commentary OHCHR 2011).

In order to carry out human rights due diligence, the fifth step a business has to undertake is to effectively monitor and track the results (UNGP 20) and communicate (UNGP 21) its commitment, analysis, and response to adverse human rights impacts. In order to improve due diligence processes and to adapt to changing (human rights) contexts, all the steps should be repeated in a circular manner, with the insights and results generated by one round feeding into and powering the next.

Beyond that, UNGP 22 provides a way forward in those instances, where businesses have caused or contributed to an adverse human rights impact that they were not able to prevent or foresee. Businesses should then “provide for or cooperate in their remediation through legitimate processes”. They should also establish or participate in operational-level grievance mechanisms for those who may be negatively impacted (UNGP 22; OHCHR 2011). UNGP 23 and 24 finish off the discussion by reminding businesses that their human rights responsibility applies anywhere they operate and that they may have to prioritize among alternative courses of action in case of simultaneously occurring human rights impacts (UNGP 23 and 24 as well as the accompanying commentary OHCHR 2011).

7 Mechanisms to Assist UNGP Implementation

Over the past years, the UNGP have stimulated a significant amount of corporate action. Based on the human rights due diligence elements outlined above, businesses have, often in cooperation with other actors, such as specialized consulting firms and expert advisers, established internal processes to help them analyse and monitor their human rights risks and engage in preventive and/or remedial action. Discussions at the annual UN Forum on Business and Human Rights are a clear testimony to these efforts (OHCHR 2017; O’Brien and Dhanarajan 2015; Shift 2012).

Nevertheless, whether recourse to the UNGP has indeed translated into positive human rights-related impact along global supply chains has repeatedly been called into question (Lukas 2011: 7–8; Ruggie 2010). This is because the UNGP, as high-level principles, deliberately leave many critical questions unanswered, such as what the scope of adequate human rights due diligence and risk assessments should be, how the concept of “leverage” should be applied and what exactly constitutes “significant” human rights risks or “serious” human rights abuse. They should be clarified through relevant implementation mechanisms or processes: to overcome conceptual difficulties, practical testing is required; to deal with implementation-related problems, relevant capacities need to be built.

It is also unlikely that an individual enterprise could master this task alone. Some have argued that human rights due diligence could be such a daunting task that businesses might resort to a very superficial analysis or could even be discouraged in the first place from identifying human rights risks and related impacts along their supply chains (Thorsen and Andreassen 2011: 11). Dialogue, exchange, and partnership processes are thus likely to be critical elements in facilitating practical application, further refining the proposed concepts through action-oriented discussion, verification and renewed practical application, all amounting to a comprehensive continuous improvement exercise. They would also help in keeping costs down and motivation (to engage) up.

To assess whether the UNGP provide a meaningful framework for the responsibility to respect human rights along global supply chains, we will therefore turn to three mechanisms or processes through which their clarification and implementation have been pursued in practice and seek to assess the results that these mechanisms have produced. They have, in turn, been commonly favoured by civil society organizations, corporations and business associations, and governments—often in combination with some or all of the other stakeholders.

8 Sustainability and Human Rights Reporting

In the debate around business and human rights, civil society actors, and increasingly also consumers, have been at the forefront of demanding greater corporate transparency. In order to credibly report on their human rights risks and impacts, the reasoning goes that reporting must be based on a solid human rights due diligence process. To facilitate this, civil society organizations have also been supporting efforts to standardize sustainability indicators and to assess and benchmark corporate sustainability reports via relevant initiatives. Launched in cooperation with the United Nations, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) has, for instance, made a significant contribution to harmonizing and standardizing sustainability reporting, including by updating its reporting framework following UNGP adoption (Global Reporting 2017; UNGP Reporting Framework 2017).

In response to these demands, business interest in reporting has grown strongly over the past years, especially of large, internationally oriented companies. In 2015, for example, more than 80% of companies listed on the “Standard & Poor’s 500” index published sustainability reports, up from a mere 20% in 2011 (Environmental Leader 2016). While these developments should certainly be welcomed, the voluntary nature of sustainability reporting has frequently been criticized.² Instead, the advanced proposal is for reporting—or even for human rights due diligence—to be a legal or mandatory requirement, thus raising the pressure on companies to seek

²And, so the argument goes, voluntary reporting implies impunity in case reporting is not undertaken or perhaps problematic aspects are overlooked and actual human rights or other abuses occur.

investment to properly and comprehensively analyse and actively manage their human rights risks.

9 Practice-Oriented Business Networks and Standard Initiatives

Businesses have, in the context of the broader corporate sustainability discussion, increasingly sought out collaborative approaches to apply and ensure adherence to sustainability and human rights standards in their supply chains. In these initiatives, companies typically define, often together with other stakeholders, private standards that are then implemented within the company (code of conduct along the supply chain), in the industry (industry or sector initiatives), or across a broad range of private sector actors (e.g. corporate citizenship initiatives or CSR networks) (OECD 2009: 237ff). Over time, their interest in engaging in such initiatives has accelerated, not least through the work of Prof. Ruggie.

Over the last two decades, voluntary standard-setting initiatives have proliferated, becoming one of the most popular tools for addressing the human rights impact of global business activities. (...) Indeed, over 180 standard-setting initiatives that address social, ethical, or environmental issues have now been mapped (Evans and Winstanley 2015).

What real impact corporate sustainability initiative for the protection of human rights can really produce along global supply chains, however, has not been clear. Voluntary learning fora and CSR initiatives addressing the private sector as a whole can certainly raise awareness of critical sustainability aspects and help to kick start timely and relevant pilot initiatives, but they usually lack appropriate verification or exclusion mechanisms to get their members to establish far-reaching due diligence procedures. Given their broad, cross-sectoral orientation, they are also unlikely to include the specific range of stakeholders required to elicit a strong commitment to respect human rights from any particular member company.

10 National Action Plans on Business and Human Rights

Based on the widespread endorsement of the UNGP and in recognition of their high-level guidance nature, the European Commission called in 2011 for the drawing up of National Action Plans (NAPs) to localize the UNGP and facilitate their application in the national context. The UN Human Rights Council soon followed suit in 2014 (European Commission 2011; UN Human Rights Council 2014).

Accordingly, a NAP should aim at affirming “the UNGP’s essential tenet that human rights apply within the business sector and indicates a political commitment to bring domestic laws, policies, and practices into alignment with this norm” (O’Brien et al. 2016: 2). Such a process should include the determination of the

country or context-specific smart mix of voluntary and mandatory measures, e.g. by clarifying and broadly communicating human rights-related expectations to businesses, such as by instructing embassies and consulates accordingly, but also by, for instance, developing appropriate regulations and adopting laws that make human rights due diligence a requirement to qualify for public procurement or foreign trade promotion measures (Bauer 2014).

To date, 13 countries have launched a NAP, including the UK, the Netherlands, the US, Germany, and Colombia, and more than 20 countries are in the process of developing one, including France and Japan (National Action Plans 2017). To ensure that NAPs lead to positive human rights impact and pave the way for effective implementation, a number of success criteria have been laid out. In particular, it has been advocated to ensure broad ownership within government and across different societal actors; to develop measures on the basis of a gap analysis (or so-called baseline assessment); and to establish a sound monitoring process with clear objectives, deadlines and assessment criteria (De Felice and Graf 2015).

How relevant have these mechanisms been in practice when it comes to positive human rights impact along global value chains? We now turn to the current experiences and evidence associated with human rights reporting, standard initiatives, and NAP processes.

11 Sustainability and Human Rights Reporting

As far as mandatory corporate reporting and human rights due diligence are concerned, there are undoubtedly instances where this has had a pronounced impact.

The US Dodd-Frank Consumer Protection Act of 2010 Section 1502 provision on conflict minerals is a case in point. The provision's requirement that companies disclose their use of conflict minerals (...) has forced listed companies to take steps to avoid contributing to the problem, which they had all but ignored prior to the passage of the law (Bauer 2014).

Large corporations such as Intel and Apple have, consequently, developed and certified conflict-free products.

In a similar spirit, the transposition of the "EU Directive on non-financial and diversity-related information by certain large companies and groups" into national law by the end of 2016 was deemed by many an opportunity to oblige large companies to engage in sustainability reporting on the basis of a comprehensive due diligence process. NAP processes in several European countries, e.g. in Germany, sought to leverage the transposition to establish a comprehensive business and human rights framework, including a meaningful smart mix of voluntary and mandatory elements.

The resulting national laws and their potential results to be obtained differ widely however. For example, in Germany, the law affects only about 550 companies, while more than 1000 are addressed in Denmark or Sweden, i.e. much smaller countries. In addition, the national laws use different risk definitions, include more or less explicit

requirements to account for business relationships along global supply chains, and prescribe very different audit procedures for reports as well as fines. Certainly worth mentioning is the French Implementation Act, which has come into effect on 27 March 2017. While only applying to just under 100 French companies, it requires reporting on all elements of due diligence and envisages high fines of up to 30 million euros in the case of non-compliance. Furthermore, the UK Modern Slavery Act has committed some 12,000–17,000 large companies to report on how they counteract human trafficking and slavery along their supply chains. Thus far however, only few companies have published a Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Statement, and state tracking overall appears weak.³

Overall, given that the more rigorous reporting requirements are still quite young, it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions on their impact along global supply chains at this stage. Making reporting a legal requirement can certainly provide an important signal for businesses to review and invest in their due diligence processes. A legal requirement on its own is unlikely, however, to be sufficient. To yield demonstrable results and track the impact on the ground, effective enforcement and participatory implementation processes are needed.

12 Practice-Oriented Business Networks and Standard Initiatives

Witnessing the proliferation of private standard initiatives and increasing interest in human rights aspects, such initiatives can certainly provide a relevant framework for the establishment of human rights due diligence procedures. In practice, however, their implementation has rarely yielded much positive impact beyond first tier suppliers, where production processes are more difficult to track, implementation capacities are weak, and human rights risks are more pronounced. They also seem to have a tendency to focus on those human rights that can be more easily addressed, e.g. on working hours and health and safety, as well as on particularly exposed sectors and regions, which means that significant human rights risks can go unchecked (Thorsen and Andreasen 2011: 8).

Sector-specific multi-stakeholder initiatives nevertheless seem to be able to yield effective human rights protection along global supply chains. In particular, due to the involvement of a critical mass of industry-specific companies, governmental members, civil society actors, and trade unions, etc., these largely voluntary initiatives can generate sufficient pressure to function as quasi-binding control mechanisms for all members to heed their provisions. An evidence-based analysis by Baumann-Pauly et al. (2016) does, for instance, provide a very positive assessment of the Fair Labour Association (FLA) and the Global Network Initiative (GNI) with regard to

³The UK example refers to an earlier example, which is not related to the transposition of the EU directive.

their reach, the effectiveness of their standard requirements, and their enforcement down to the level of member companies' lower tier suppliers; Thorsen and Andreassen (2011) advance similar results to argue in favour of their so-called third generation responsible supply chain management model, which is, in essence, sector-specific and draws on the participation of a broad range of actors.

13 National Action Plans on Business and Human Rights

An earlier analysis of existing NAPs, based on the success criteria mentioned above, detects much room for improvement in yielding tangible results. No country seems to have conducted a baseline assessment; targets and implementation criteria are missing. While a later analysis points to numerous improvements such as wider stakeholder participation or an increasing number of baseline assessments, a proper smart mix as well as monitoring and accountability mechanisms to support NAP implementation remain absent (De Felice and Graf 2015: 65).

It thus appears that NAP processes as such are also not a guarantor for effective national implementation, including along global value chains. The hope voiced by various authors is for NAPs to become more effective over time. Supported by a global dialogue as well as monitoring and capacity building measures via the United Nations (Working Group on Business and Human Rights), NAP processes are expected to build on successful experiences through continuous review and experimentation (De Felice and Graf 2015: 65, O'Brien et al. 2016: 15).

14 Towards a Comprehensive Business and Human Rights Ecosystem

The adoption of the UNGP in 2011 has fuelled a global dialogue on the roles and responsibilities of states and business in upholding human rights in a globalized world. As far as businesses are concerned, the UNGP provides a detailed discussion of the responsibility to respect, but by virtue of their being high-level principles, more advanced concepts, such as the various steps required to undertake a proper human rights due diligence, need to be interpreted and applied to the local context through practical application, peer pressure, and peer learning. We have looked at several mechanisms that aim to promote and incentivize such contextualization, with a focus on impact along global supply chains.

Like the UNGP, many of these mechanisms are still very young so that a comprehensive assessment of their relevance is difficult to undertake at this stage, especially as regards human rights reporting and NAP processes. The only clear and clearly positive evidence available relates to the experience of sector-specific multi-stakeholder initiatives, as these seem to be able to assemble the right kind of pressure

and peer group to mandate, effectively implement, and monitor human rights-related actions along global supply chains.

Such initiatives are nevertheless unlikely to come about just by themselves. They need strong policy signals and incentives and rigorous frameworks to compare their effectiveness and results, as well as relevant platforms to facilitate exchange, benchmarking across sectors, and an alignment of a broad range of business and human rights initiatives.

This is exactly where all the implementation mechanisms could complement and reinforce each other. Reporting frameworks provide guidance on specific results and facilitate the comparison of initiatives and their results. Mandatory reporting requirements emit strong policy signals. Sector-specific initiatives create, apply, and monitor measures to protect human rights beyond individual supply chains. And NAP processes provide a platform “for the critical review of existing regulatory approaches on business and human rights, as well as for dialogue about policy innovations” and the broader political, economic, legal and regulatory factors influencing the success or failure of such mechanisms in practice (O’Brien et al. 2016: 15–16).

While the different stakeholder approaches are extremely important in their own right and respond to the roles and responsibilities laid out by the PRR framework, their full power can be unleashed only by unifying the pillars and building on multi-stakeholder processes in a comprehensive ecosystem for protecting human rights in a context of global business activity.

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