NAVIGATING RISK AND RESILIENCE:

LEARNINGS FROM DIALOGUES BETWEEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND BUSINESS



Open Civic Space as a Driver of Enterprise Resilience

Human rights are fundamental to the benefits brought by open civic space such as resilience and long-term business viability. Beyond meeting compliance requirements, when businesses proactively ensure respect for human rights and civic freedoms everybody benefits.

Human rights defenders offer invaluable knowledge and lived experience that help companies identify risks early, navigate high-stakes complexity, and protect long-term value creation. Human rights defenders are a key actor for companies to work with on minimising supply chain exposure and reputational hazards while working towards an open civic space that benefits all and leveraging trusted partnerships for the predictable and stable operating environments that are core to thriving economies.

Synthesized from years of dialogue between business executives and human rights defenders in the Business Network on Civic Freedoms and Human Rights Defenders, this briefing highlights the top 10 strategic actions recommended for senior corporate leadership.

BUSINESS NETWORK ON CIVIC FREEDOMS & HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Top 10 Strategic Actions for C-Suite & Senior Business Leadership

INTERNAL ACTION

1. **Establish and Enforce a Corporate Policy on Engagement with Human Rights Defenders, and Mainstream Protections Across the Business**
   Develop, publish and implement a specific corporate policy on how the company will engage with and protect human rights defenders throughout and after the due diligence process. Integrate safeguards for defenders into core corporate policies, including around land acquisition, labor practices, climate transition strategies, and digital technology deployments.

2. **Adopt an Explicit Zero-Tolerance Policy on Reprisals & SLAPPs**
   Establish, publish, and enforce senior management-approved policies prohibiting threats, violence, and Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) targeting defenders and civil society.

3. **Conduct Continuous, Risk-Based Human Rights Due Diligence (HREDD) & Transparent Reporting**
   Move beyond point-in-time compliance to iterative due diligence embedded across all business functions and global supply chains. Publicly disclose how human rights and environmental risks, potential risks to HRDs, and associated mitigation outcomes are tracked and reported - including differentiation by marginalised identities. Treat environmental health and safety as a core due diligence pillar.

4. **Set Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) as a Governance Red Line**
   Establish primary, community-verified mapping of risks to Indigenous Peoples' rights. Ensure FPIC rules are understood as an authoritative governance requirement where lack of consent triggers project modification, suspension, or non-investment.

BOARD GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP

5. **Mandate Formal Board-Level Oversight & Direct Stakeholder Engagement**
   Formally assign board responsibility for human rights performance. Ensure executive board members routinely engage in direct, unmediated dialogue with frontline rights-holders rather than relying solely on summarized reporting.

6. **Bridge the Global-to-Local Operational Implementation Gap**
   Equip regional managers and country subsidiaries with the training, resources, and authority needed to apply global human rights standards - including with regards to human rights defenders - over weaker domestic legal baselines.

EXTERNAL ENGAGEMENT

7. **Partner with Local Civil Society as Long-Term Allies**
   Build direct relationships with national defender networks and communities before market entry or capital investment. Treat local civil society as essential strategic partners that provide valuable early warning systems, proactive risk identification, and risk mitigation.

8. **Establish Safe, Accessible Grievance & Remedy Mechanisms**
   Align local operational grievance and accountability mechanisms with global UNGP-aligned, corporate-level oversight to guarantee consistent, safe, and confidential handling of grievances with zero tolerance for retaliatory action.

9. **Align Public Policy Advocacy with Human Rights Commitments**
   Maintain strict corporate governance over lobbying activities and trade association memberships to ensure private political influence supports rule of law, open civic space, and human rights.

10. **Mobilize Collective Action Across Industry Ecosystems**
    Utilize coalitions, investor leverage, and peer collaboration to address systemic, sectoral, or regional human rights challenges and regulatory gaps that no single company can resolve independently.

KEY RESOURCES

UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) (United Nations, 2011)

UNGPs: guidance on ensuring respect for human rights defenders | Executive Summary (United Nations, 2021)

Indicators on how to track businesses' respect of the rights of human rights defenders (International Service for Human Rights, 2024)

Business Frameworks and Actions to Support Human Rights Defenders: a Retrospective and Recommendations (Business & Human Rights Centre and International Service for Human Rights, 2025)

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