

PRESS RELEASE

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New approach to Human Rights Impact Assessments would see communities and companies collaborate

A new discussion paper details how a collaborative approach to human rights impact assessments would operate in practice.

New York, Copenhagen, and Paris, March 23, 2017—The Columbia Center on Sustainable Investment, the Danish Institute for Human Rights and the Sciences Po Law School Clinic today published a discussion paper entitled ‘A Collaborative Approach to Human Rights Impact Assessment.’ The paper proposes a new approach to conducting human rights impact assessments (HRIAs) of business operations or projects, which brings together project-affected people, such as communities and workers, the company, and other stakeholders to jointly design and implement an assessment. The aim of this new approach is to address one of the key challenges of current HRIA practices: the limited engagement and participation of relevant stakeholders, which can undermine effectiveness and trust.

“The extensive research carried out for this project should benefit and encourage practitioners, companies and NGOs, as well as researchers in this field, to take stock of current impasses and, simultaneously, imagine new possibilities that might transcend those,” said Jeremy Perelman, Director of the Sciences Po Law School Clinic.

Increased use of HRIA requires new practices

Since the adoption of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, which require companies to ‘assess and address’ the negative impacts of their operations, HRIAs have increasingly been used by companies as well as affected communities to assess the actual or potential impacts of a business project or operation. However, while HRIA methodologies and standards have evolved since then, current assessment practices have not, and they frequently confront a number of challenges.

“Our research revealed that HRIA processes regularly encounter barriers to ensuring rights-compliant investments,” said Sam Szoke-Burke, Legal Researcher at the Columbia Center on Sustainable Investment. *“There is often a lot of mistrust between key stakeholders, and company-conducted HRIAs often struggle to create sufficient opportunities for project-affected people to*

communicate their perspectives and influence decision-making regarding an investment project. This approach is intended to address those shortcomings.”

Steps on the way to a successful process

The paper outlines factors that will affect the effectiveness of such an approach and describes a number of steps that will be required to ensure a successful process, from ensuring meaningful participation and capacity building of all stakeholders involved in the assessment to carefully governing and funding the process.

With this collaborative approach, the authors aim to improve communication between relevant stakeholders, increase access to relevant information for rights holders, encourage greater engagement with the findings and recommendations of the assessment, and most importantly, ensure increased prevention or mitigation of negative human rights impacts.

“We hope that companies and project-affected people will be interested in working together to pilot a full-fledged collaborative HRIA, or to test certain elements of this new approach, in order to create a better relationship between the different parties involved which is built on trust and consensus,” said Tulika Bansal, Senior Advisor, Danish Institute for Human Rights.

About

The paper is the result of a 2-year long research project, supported by The Tiffany & Co. Foundation, and is based on extensive desktop research; interviews with 49 people with relevant experience including representatives of companies, civil society organizations, communities, and academia; as well as a roundtable bringing together over a dozen stakeholders and HRIA experts to receive feedback on the research findings.

For questions about the paper, or to discuss ideas for piloting a collaborative HRIA, please visit: ccsi.columbia.edu/work/projects/chria or contact:

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