



A powerful  
and balanced  
voice for business

100  
1920-2020



UNITED STATES COUNCIL FOR  
INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

22 January 2021

**IOE-USCIB JOINT INPUT TO THE HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL THIRD INTERSESSIONAL MEETING FOR DIALOGUE  
AND COOPERATION ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

**“Building back better: Integrating human rights  
in sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic”**

---

COVID-19 has amplified existing human rights, employment, economic and social challenges, such as deficient health systems, high informality, lacking social protection, weak governance and poor labour market frameworks, insufficient education opportunities – particularly for women – and inadequate access to digital infrastructure for a large part of mankind, just to name a few. The fact that a health crisis, which turned into an economic, employment and livelihoods crisis, became a humanitarian catastrophe for millions and millions of people is substantially the result of these gaps.

The Agenda 2030 aims to tackle these challenges. It provides an ambitious set of goals and targets to improve the lives of people, protect the planet and ensure more equal prosperity. However, already before the pandemic, progress has been slow and unevenly distributed. The international community is not on track to meeting these vital targets, and COVID-19 has compounded the challenges.

But the pandemic has also opened-up opportunities. Suddenly there is a much stronger focus on addressing underlying root causes, most clearly the importance of good governance and rule of law. Sustainable social protection systems, for example, have become a key priority for many stakeholders. There is also a new openness for collaboration. The Call to Action in the Garment Industry is an example for collective action in which a broad alliance of companies, federations and trade unions under the umbrella of the ILO aims to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the garment industry by supporting business continuity and workers income as well as the development of social protection systems. It will be of critical importance to preserve this strengthened collaborative approach as we come out of the pandemic.

SDG Goal 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions is a fundamental means of implementation of the Agenda 2030 as well as Human Rights. We will never be able to protect and ensure the human rights of every individual as well as to eliminate poverty (goal 1), to ensure decent work and inclusive economic growth (goal 8), and address climate change (goal 13) without peace, justice and strong institutions. Good governance is the foundation of the pyramid upon which all other efforts rest.

Good Governance is also key for enabling business to fully contribute to the Agenda 2030 and to support the enterprises and employers in their efforts to respect human rights. Companies often operate under extremely challenging contexts. For instance, more than 40 countries in the world have not ratified the ILO core labour standards. More than 70 countries in the world criminalize homosexuality. How can a company promote diversity and allow their staff to live their identity if it is required to report their sexual orientation? It is in these kinds of circumstances where ethical stewardship by business is most needed, but at the same time the most challenging.

Building a better future post-Covid means to begin with overcoming the pandemic impacting our global health. The private sector has a key role to play, and thanks to both UN outreach and proactive business efforts, there are many examples to point to in this space. For example, USCIB has launched Business Partners to CONVINCE, an initiative of USCIB's Business Partners for Sustainable Development to roll out an ambitious communications and education program to leverage private sector employers to advance vaccine literacy and help ensure widespread acceptance of safe, effective and accessible vaccines.

Building a better future also means government investment in social protection systems, education, training, meaningfully addressing informality, and providing support for the many small and medium enterprises which make up the majority of the world's businesses and employment.

Critically, building back better requires countries live up to the expectations as expressed in the international human rights conventions and environmental treaties. It is about implementation, implementation, implementation! The UN supervisory machineries have a key role to play in holding countries accountable for their human rights performance. Building back better also means to see how peer pressure amount countries through the supervisory mechanisms can be strengthened.

Under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, all business enterprises should respect human rights and address harms with which they are involved. Since 2015, companies have also committed to make a positive contribution towards the Sustainable Development Goals. The two UN instruments - the UN Guiding Principles and the Agenda 2030 - balance the twin goals of responsible business conduct whereby companies "do no harm" and also "do good."

However, a company on its own will not be able to make a lasting difference. A company headquartered in the US, Europe or Japan will not be able to address on its own systemic challenges deep down in its supply chain. Only in collaboration with governments, peers and stakeholders is it possible to achieve change. Employer and Business Organisations play a particularly important role in this regard, as they can speak-up as the legitimate voice of the entire economy, support the organisation of collective action and jointly engage with governments to demand change.

The labour market reforms in Qatar are one of the examples where social partners in collaboration with the ILO and the government of Qatar played a leading role in achieving fundamental change - in this regard the abolishment of the kafala system. Together we can learn from this advancement and seek out opportunities where this shared success can be replicated. The IOE has launched an initiative to strengthen collaboration between the UN Resident Coordinators and the private sector at national level to promote public-private partnerships for the Agenda 2030.

The SDGs are not implemented in New York or Geneva, but at national level. It is there, on the ground, where we need to trigger collective action for sustained change. Building back better means to ensure that the call for public-private partnerships and stronger collaboration with the private sector is not only rhetoric at UN level, but becomes a reality at local level.

The "new normal" in a post-COVID-19 world must be a "better normal". More and better opportunities for particularly the marginalized populations is a key aspect of this and of crucial importance to address inequality. Equal access to high-quality education is an essential condition so that everyone has the chance to deploy his or her talents and abilities optimally in society and to contribute to economic life.

One underlying cause for the vulnerable position of women is education. In the most recent years for which data are available, young women accounted for 59 per cent of the total illiterate youth population globally. Moreover, even though women are over-represented among tertiary graduates in OECD countries (57 percent of first-time graduates), they remain under-represented in certain fields of study, such as science and engineering. Insights indicate that those who lack a comfort with these skills are more likely to find limited career options.

Women are held back by discriminatory legislation. 104 economies still prevent women from working in certain jobs, simply because they are women. In 59 economies there are no laws on sexual harassment in the workplace. And in 18 economies, husbands can legally prevent their wives from working. Removing legal restrictions that hinder women from participating in the formal labour market and having formal self-employment opportunities such as proper access to finance for female entrepreneurs is key to address inequalities.

The Agenda 2030 is a human rights agenda. According to the Danish Institute for Human Rights, more than 90% of the SDGs targets are linked to international human rights and labour standards. Another way of looking at it is that the SDGs are underpinned by human rights and will only be achieved if principles of rule of law, participation, accountability and non-discrimination are respected. IOE and USCIB call on governments and the UN system to take bold action to deliver on both agendas and to build back better.

The UN is the right global body to host this global effort, and success will depend on multilateralism that is inclusive. We reiterate our call for the UN to pursue inclusive multilateralism that:

- promotes peace, cooperation, democratic values and social justice
- relies on effective and transparent multilateral bodies
- advances collaborative approaches among states
- encourages international dialogue and cooperation to design and implement effective policies
- engages business across all sectors and as well as other stakeholders in substantive dialogue and partnerships

Business is fully committed to support governments and the UN System in this endeavour and promote both in tandem – the UN Guiding Principles and the Agenda 2030. Let's build back better together.

\* \* \* \* \*