

ABN AMRO Human Rights Programme

Civic freedoms and human rights defenders: what is the role of business?

On 24 June 2019, ABN AMRO co-organised a conference on civic freedoms and human rights defenders with the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre and the International Service for Human Rights. The 140 participants represented companies, civil society, government, academia and frontline human rights defenders. The event focused on the role that business is playing, and should play in addressing the fact that civic freedoms, such as the right to freedom of expression and the right to freedom of association, are under increasing pressure. [The CIVICUS Monitor](#) indicates that only 3% of the global population live in countries with a truly 'open civic space'.

In [Shared Space under Pressure](#), the report that inspired us to organise the conference, Bennett Freeman explores how shrinking civic freedoms relate to responsible business conduct. It explains the business case and normative framework for taking action, and provides a range of actions and inactions by companies in different countries and industries. A well-known example is Yahoo!, which handed over information to the Chinese government leading to the arrest and conviction of a journalist who published a critical report about the 1989 killings on Tiananmen Square. After Yahoo! settled a lawsuit with the journalist's family, it became the first company in the technology industry to set up a human rights programme. Through human rights impact assessments, the company began identifying circumstances in which freedom of expression or privacy could be jeopardized. It also co-founded the [Global Networking Initiative](#), a multi-stakeholder platform that aims to protect digital rights.



Creating trust between human rights defenders and companies

'Know the most important human rights for your company' and 'collaborate beyond your comfort zone'. These are two of the main action points for CEOs from the recently published [CEO Guide to Human Rights](#) of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development. At the conference in June 2019, we heard stories by three frontline human rights defenders from Zambia, Kenya and Colombia. They were in the Netherlands as part of the [Shelter City programme](#), an initiative of Justice & Peace, a client of ABN AMRO MeesPierson Institutions & Charities. Together with speakers from Amnesty International, Pax and Mondiaal FNV, they showed how civil society is constrained in advocating for

better human rights protection, whether it concerns workplace inclusion, LGBT+ people, or land restitution in post-conflict situations. It is important that businesses, including the financial sector, engage constructively and in good faith with civil society, trade unions and human rights defenders in order to identify risks to human rights.

The Business and Human Rights Resource Centre has [a portal](#) with up-to-date information on attacks against human rights defenders, as well as background material.

Business & Human Rights Resource Centre

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Business, Civic Freedoms & Human Rights Defenders Portal

1693 Total attacks on defenders tracked in the portal

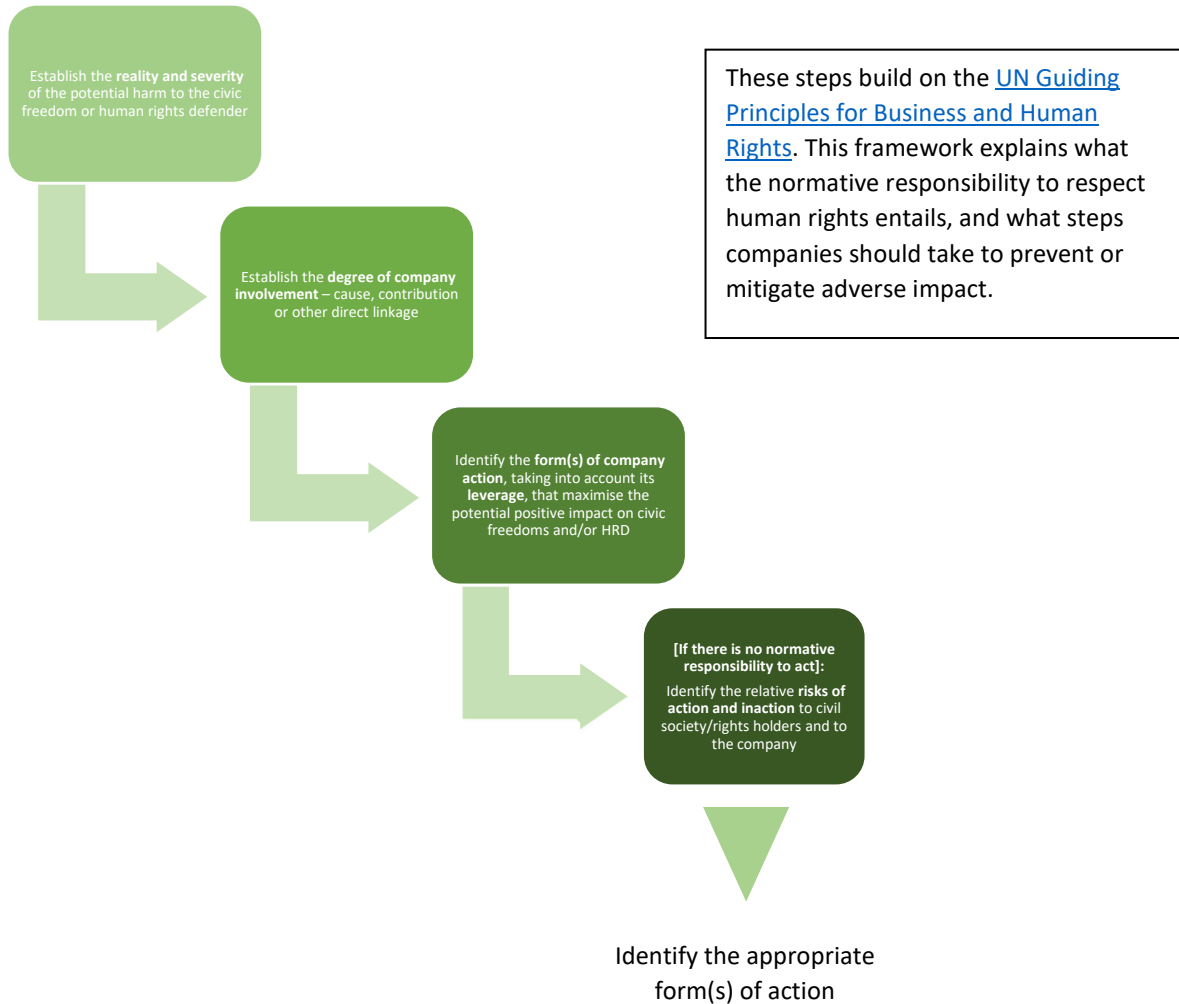
Use with caution: The role of the OECD National Contact Points in protecting human rights defenders. Attacks are rising against human rights defenders. At least 3,500 killings since 1998.

Human rights defenders face reprisals. Here's what OECD and National Contact Points can do to protect them.

G20 Summit 2019: 55% of attacks on defenders are directly or indirectly related to G20 cos.

Decision-making tool for companies

What should companies do when they are confronted with threats to civic freedoms or human rights defenders? And does it make a difference whether there is a connection to their own business — for example, police violence against trade union representatives at a supplier? To enable decision-making within companies, the 'Shared Space' report identifies the following steps:



Examples from practice

There is no fixed menu from which companies can choose the actions they need to take. The 'Shared Space' report contains many examples from across sectors and countries. At the conference, Robeco, Heineken, Vattenfall and FMO shared their experiences.

Vattenfall: Sharing best practices in industry associations

Vattenfall is committed to becoming a fossil-free energy company within one generation. While the company still operates coal-fired power plants in Germany and the Netherlands, it is acting on its responsibility in the coal supply chain. In recent years, the company actively engaged with its suppliers



and other stakeholders in Colombia to address human rights impacts. In this context, Vattenfall worked closely with the NGO Pax as well as with local stakeholders. To facilitate a broader agenda on responsible business conduct in the coal supply chain, Vattenfall also co-founded the Bettercoal Initiative. As the company's sourcing from Colombia came to an end with the closure of the Hemweg power plant at the end of 2019, collaboration through this industry initiative focused on ensuring that Vattenfall's lessons learned can be used by energy companies that are still active in Colombia.

Key take-aways:

- Recognise, support and defend the shared space that companies and civil society enjoy
- Connect with local communities to gain local insights and learn from real-life situations
- Collaborate with the entire value chain to create impact
- Enable change through stakeholder engagement and industry collaboration
- The financial sector has a large role in enabling change

ABN AMRO International Human Rights Conferences

- 2014 Starting our journey in collaboration with Gay Bankers Network
- 2015 Business and Human Rights with Nobel Peace Prize winner Kailash Satyarthi
- 2016 The Dutch Banking Sector Agreement on Human Rights
- 2017 Changemakers – with ABN AMRO MeesPierson
- 2018 Innovations in Human Rights Due Diligence
- 2019 Civic freedoms and human rights defenders: what is the role of business?

About ABN AMRO

ABN AMRO serves retail, private and corporate banking clients with a primary focus on the Netherlands and with selective operations internationally. ABN AMRO offers a full range of services to its clients, not only in the Netherlands, but wherever their business takes them. Based on its engagement with stakeholders, ABN AMRO draws up a plan of action, monitors progress and reports the results in its Annual Report, Human Rights Report or online.

Additional information about human rights can be found on abnamro.com/humanrights. For further inquiries about human rights, please contact Maria Anne van Dijk or Ruben Zandvliet at humanrights@nl.abnamro.com.