



SWISSNESS AND RESPONSIBLE BUSINESS

SWISSNESS AND RESPONSIBLE BUSINESS



Between the 10 and 14 June 2019, Bangkok hosted a series of important events as part of the first 'Business and Human Rights Week' to be held in Thailand, with a sizeable global and ASEAN region participation. Switzerland was very active: the Swiss Ambassador opened the „AICHR Interregional Dialogue: Sharing Good Practices on Business and Human Rights“, reminding that “the Swiss government expects business enterprises that are based and/or operate in Switzerland to respect human rights in all of their business activities, wherever they operate” and Swiss government representatives engaged with the government of Thailand at various levels on related issues. Switzerland and Thailand are about to have a clear common frame-

work under which to pursue this dialogue, the Thai government being the first country in Asia to soon launch its 'National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights' (NAP), while Switzerland launched its own NAP in 2016.

But what is this all about and why should human rights matter to business? They do because the actions of business companies can affect people's enjoyment of human rights either positively or negatively. By creating jobs they contribute to economic and social development and the raising of global individual living standards. But they can also affect the human rights of their employees and contract workers, their customers, workers in their supply chains, communities around their operations and

the end users of their products or services.

Incidents such as the Rana Plaza building collapse illustrate that sourcing from countries where production costs are low helps on the one hand companies to provide clothing at low prices to their customers, – but lax safety standards can have severe impacts on thousands of workers.

As the real actors of today's globalization, business companies have an increasing responsibility for the social, human and environmental impact of their activities, particularly in fragile or developing areas. Investors, governments, clients and consumers are expecting more and more from companies (including SMEs) that they are aware



SWISSNESS AND RESPONSIBLE BUSINESS

of their impact on human rights and that they take precautionary measures to prevent abuses.

Under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, a global framework adopted at the United Nations in 2011, the corporate responsibility to respect human rights applies to all business enterprises, regardless of their size, the sector to which they belong, their operating environment, ownership or structure.

On 9 December 2016 the Federal Council adopted a report outlining a national action plan for the implementation of the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. (NAP). Switzerland is one of the first countries to adopt such a strategy in order to promote coherence between business activities and human rights.

The Swiss government expects all business enterprises that are based and/or operate in Switzerland to respect human rights in all of their business activities, wherever they operate, independently of their size, their activity or their sector. This applies also to SMEs, as technology and globalization have enabled even small companies to source and sell across the globe. The longer and more complex business value chains get – the more removed businesses become from their impacts on people produ-

cing, transporting, selling or buying their products, which makes conducting human rights due diligence not an easy task.

Switzerland is therefore reaching out to all companies, including by providing them practical tools, such as the recently published information flyer that provides Swiss SMEs with a practical overview on the steps required to implement human rights due diligence according to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and due diligence guidance of the OECD (<https://www.nap-bhr.admin.ch/napbhr/en/home/unternehmen/brochuresme.html>)

Although all sectors may be exposed to risks related to human rights, some sectors are more affected than others by potential violations of human rights.

The commodity sector, in particular, faces serious human rights risks in exporting countries.

Switzerland is one of the most important hubs for raw materials in the world. That is why the Confederation has developed, in collaboration with various interest groups (cantons, NGOs and the private sector), a guide for the application of good practices in the commodity trade. The guide describes what is expected of commercial companies in terms of respect for human rights and provi-

des practical advice on how to implement human rights due diligence along the entire supply chain.

On the government's new website, www.nap-bhr.admin.ch, companies will find a lot of useful information on business and human rights (workshops, instructions for human rights due diligence, industrial initiatives as well as practical examples).

By Remy Friedmann

**Senior Advisor
Desk Human Security
and Business
Federal Department of
Foreign Affairs (FDFA)
Human Security Division
Deputy Head, Human Rights
Policy Section
Bundesgasse 32, 3003 Bern**

**remy.friedmann@eda.admin.ch
www.eda.admin.ch**