



Network France

Business and Climate justice: What role can business play in tackling the adverse human rights impacts of climate change?

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Participants: Brice Lalonde (UN Global Compact), Volker Türk (UNHCR), Mary Robinson (President of Mary Robinson Foundation & Former President of Ireland), Marine Franck (UNHCR), Didier Terrolle (Sanofi), Pascale Guiffant (Suez Environnement), Philip Bloomer (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre).

Opening - Brice Lalonde, Volker Türk & Mary Robinson



Mr. Lalonde opened the conference by addressing the impacts of climate change on the human rights, their dire consequences on societies, as well as on businesses and their supply chains. Initiatives such as the UN Global Compact demonstrate a growing responsibility from the corporate sector to address these issues. Any action to address climate change should be the result of a careful work to protect and respect human rights, not further undermine them.

Volker Türk pointed out the growing link between forced displacements and climate change observed by the UNHCR, with multidimensional impacts such as natural hazards, socio-economic conflicts around resources, legal questions and inter-generational consequences. As they balance long-term and short-term goals through their strategies, businesses have an expertise worth sharing on these issues. Mr. Türk regretted that climate change and migration are both still seen as risks and dangers, not much as opportunities.

Mrs. Robinson started by expressing her appreciation for the Business & Human Rights initiative and the UN Global Compact work. The COP21 summit may be the most important action taken on climate change yet, because of the diverse range of actors that joined the discussions: civil society, businesses and finance as well as governments. At the intersection of human rights, climate change issues and human development, climate justice seeks to prevent populations from suffering from climate action, and as much as possible actually benefit from it. Because they interact with every actor on the supply chain, businesses can be efficient actors in managing climate risk, building resilience, and ultimately secure climate justice. To that extend, they need to show leadership, responsibility, and transparency. Change can be done in 25 years or even less, but only with a clear mandate. However, climate change must not be an excuse to allow bad situations or worsen them. People, species and ecosystems are the ones who need to be protected from climate change and its consequences, not the planet.



How is climate change undermining human rights?

One person per second is displaced by natural disasters, and the impact of climate change on people will worsen, provoking social tensions and armed conflicts around natural resources, such as land, fuel, water, cattle or food. Women and children are especially vulnerable in the areas impacted, and forced displacements can lead to other problems, such as human trafficking.

For Didier Terrolle, there are growing evidences of the links between climate change and access to healthcare, in both developing and developed countries. World Health Organisation already estimated an average of 250 000 additional deaths between 2030 and 2050 linked to climate change, resulting from diseases, malnutrition, or heatwaves. The American Academy of Pediatrics estimated the risk of death from natural disasters to become 14 times higher for US women and children.

Pascale Guiffant highlighted the key issue of water access. Nowadays, 800 million people do not have access to water, and 2.5 billion have no access to sanitation. By 2045, 30% of the population will live in water-scarce areas. Many countries still don't recognize water access as a human right.

How to tackle these issues and integrate them into strategic business policies and operations?

The most obvious answer is by acting directly to alleviate them, depending on the core activities of the company. In the southern hemisphere, Suez focuses on improving water access: this involves an area of expertise crossing human rights, resources and development as well as climate issues.

As part of its corporate projects, Suez is already working in several large cities (Casablanca, Mumbai, La Paz, etc.) to extend water-supply services to unconnected or disadvantaged neighborhoods, with support from the local authorities.



On the topic of helping refugees, UNHCR works by protecting and helping refugees as well as by preventing these situations from happening in the first place. Marine Frank highlights the notion of resilience, by effective adaptation of the environment: land rehabilitation, use of renewable energies in refugee camps, etc. By essence, refugees don't want to leave their home: they look at their situation as temporary, but it can extend for a long period of time. Therefore, it is key to improve resilience and security in refugee camps. Relocation of entire populations is a last resort measure, but must be planned down in advance in order to be effective.

Corporate actors can also contribute through reducing their own carbon footprint. For example, Sanofi committed to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 20% between 2010 and 2020 on its industrial and R&D sites. Main areas of savings include transportation of medicines and vaccines, as well as optimizing packaging.

Besides, Sanofi uses its expertise to develop solutions to current diseases infecting these zones, like dengue or malaria, and ensuring that these solutions are affordable for the populations at risk, for example by setting up tier-pricing programs.

What are the challenges and risks to face while addressing human rights impacts?

According to Philip Bloomer, the main question is not to know if the transition will happen or not, but if it will be a fair process. On the subject of climate justice, many actors suffer from the classification of issues: climate change and human rights are perceived as two separate topics, making it harder to solve problems linked to both topics or allowing them to clash with each other. A move towards renewable energies is essential for a sustainable growth, but many projects of windfarm or hydroelectric dams are linked to human rights abuses, for example in Mexico or in Brazil. Solving the issues of climate change must not come at the expense of the rights of communities and workers.

Business responsibilities must be assessed: by clarifying their role under the Paris climate agreements and the Sustainable Development Goals for example. Investors are already willing to take climate change more seriously.

The use of benchmarking companies, with work such as the Oxfam initiative “Behind The Brands” could be a way to help investors to identify key actors.

Not all companies respond to the same pressures or incentives, but adaptation efforts should be strongly encouraged, through benchmarking and accountability driven by civil society. At the same time, it is important to hold companies responsible for their good and bad practices: litigation efforts have already begun to link companies to the human rights impacts caused by their contributions to climate change.



How can businesses collaborate with other actors in order to implement these changes?

According to Pascale Guiffant, the private sector is already very organized on climate change issues and pushing for more awareness. Assessing companies impacts on society demonstrates that their action can already be positive. For example, while implementing waste management solutions in Morocco, Suez not only provided technical solutions, but also worked in partnership with local waste keepers to structure and legitimate their own activity.

On the same issue of improving social status of marginalized populations, Marine Franck added that women are often key for community-based solutions, because they generally are in charge of maintaining energy, food or water production in their community.

In order to get feedback on its activities as well as on potential issues, Sanofi highlighted the importance of developing partnerships with experts, NGOs and academics, quoting its experience with the “Break Dengue Coalition”. Technical solutions are often not enough, collaboration with civil society is key to be efficient: Mr. Terrolle took the example of Sanofi’s work in schools and with the civil society to develop awareness and encourage prevention of diseases and risks, through initiative such as “Schoolchildren against Malaria” or the “National Malaria Control Program”.

Marine Franck agreed that international organizations and stakeholders such as the UNFCCC are potential supporters for relevant actors and competent frameworks. Through local meetings, initiatives such as the [Nansen project](#) can provide toolbox of solutions, that can be implemented at a regional scale. She also highlighted the role of private sector in helping international organizations, through their foundations and partnerships.

Conclusion

The implementation of climate justice will be a collective effort. Currently, vulnerable populations are impacted by climate change and by all kind of corporate projects, including in some cases sustainable development projects. Climate change have a wide range of impacts, and requires various area of expertise ranging from climate justice to epidemiology to alleviate them. There is a growing need for “informed projects”, looking not only to reduce impact on the environment, but their own impact on populations and societies as well, and beneficiating from having a bigger picture.

Global Compact France thanks all participants of this session who permitted to have a passionate and inspiring debate, and the UNHCR for its support. We also want to thank the COP21 organization team, who helped on setting up this conference. You can find pictures of the event on our [Flickr account](#).