

business-humanrights.org

International business leaders gathered on January 28, 2005 at the World Economic Forum in Davos for the much anticipated launch of the world's first website covering the human rights conduct of over 3,000 companies. That human rights would attract the interest of the global business community's top decision makers should not be surprising. In the last decade, an increasing number of businesses around the world have come to recognize the significance of identifying practical ways of integrating human rights into their business practices.

Although some companies have been driven to act on human rights by public scandals or lawsuits over alleged human rights abuses, many have acted without an external stimulus or simply because they believe it is the right thing to do. And while governments should institute the regulatory framework for safeguarding human rights, a growing number of companies no longer dispute that they have an obligation to conduct their business in accordance with universal human rights principles. We at Center for Democracy are pleased to be doing our part in Serbia by bringing together these two main actors in society for our recently launched project, Government and Business in Practicing Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in Serbia, which concentrates on the rights related to work and employment. The rights of employees to a healthy and safe work environment, as well as fair and unbiased practices in hiring and firing, are just a few of the examples of responsible human rights practices in business.

Over the next 15 months Center for Democracy will meet with and hold conferences for local business and government leaders in Belgrade, Kragujevac, Kraljevo, Paraćin, Kruševac, Niš, Novi Sad, Zrenjanin, Subotica and Sombor. Center for Democracy is running a public campaign, featuring billboards, outdoor events and TV spots, promoting rights related to work and employment. The awareness raising campaign in these 10 cities will culminate in a national conference in 2008 on Government and Business in Practicing Economic and Social Rights in Serbia, bringing together top leaders from the public and private sectors, and including non-governmental organizations and the public.

The EU and US communities in Serbia recognize the importance of human rights in business, as evidenced by the financial support our project has received from the EU and the Institute for Sustainable Communities. In the last ten years, international organizations such as UN Global Compact and Business Leaders Initiative on Human Rights have legitimized the issue of human rights to the business community. Consequently, many, although not necessarily the majority of, multi-national companies operating in Serbia have already integrated human rights into their business management. Our goal at Center for Democracy is to introduce and encourage the adoption of the best existing practices to local and international companies in Serbia.

Why you should DO it...

The concept of business as a "force for good" and as a powerful actor in economic, environmental and social development has been strengthened in recent years. In terms of the "business case" for human rights, these are just a few of the commonly accepted benefits:

Enhance corporate reputation and brand image

While consumers may not specifically be searching for products or services compliant with ethical standards, they will be negatively influenced by reports that a company is complicit in human rights abuses. When given the choice, they will choose the product or service of a competitor seen to have a cleaner reputation and track record.

Gain competitive advantage

Companies that take human rights seriously and build a body of practical knowledge and experience around the subject, will be better equipped to enter new markets where similar human rights dilemmas are prevalent, than those companies confronting human rights issues for the first time. Their experience in dealing with human rights issues makes them attractive partners for customers, suppliers, distributors, potential employees and governments.

Improve employee recruitment, retention and productivity

Responsible business practices have become an integral part of the curriculum at a growing number of business schools. Adopting and implementing human rights policies are increasingly considered to be symbols of good overall management and, therefore, a persuasive means of recruiting high caliber employees and encouraging staff loyalty.

Improve stakeholder relations

Poor relations with the local community or a failure to engage with vulnerable groups can foster resentment and suspicion. On the other hand, building trust and confidence among local stakeholders sets a solid foundation for the long-term security and effectiveness of an operation. A clear commitment to responsible human rights policies and practices enhances this relationship and limits the risks of false and unfounded claims/accusations against the company.