

Global Compact Network, India

Launch of Children's Rights & Business Principles

Date Aug 1st, 2012

Venue: Hotel Ashok, New Delhi

Dr. Sayeeda Hameed, Member, Planning Commission of India, Dr. Shantha Sinha, Chairperson, National Commission on Protection of Child Rights, Mr. James Gitau representing UNICEF, India, Ms. Gayatri Subramaniam from the Indian Institute of Corporate Affairs, Ms. Eija Hietavou, Corporate Alliance Specialist, UNICEF Geneva, Mr. Clement Chauvet, Chief – External Relations and Resource Mobilisation, UNICEF India, Dr. Uddesh Kohli, Senior Advisor, United Nations Global Compact, Mr. Thomas Chandy, CEO, Save the Children, India and distinguished delegates.

I welcome you this afternoon to the formal launch of the 'Children's Rights and Business Principles' and thank you for investing your time in joining cause with this issue. The United Nations Global Compact, UNICEF and Save the Children have done yeoman service to the cause of child emancipation by putting – together these ten principles to guide business entities on matters related to the rights of children. Increasingly, after States and Civil Society, business entities are assuming larger responsibility of engaging with Society directly and becoming agents of affirmative action and proactive change. Such initiatives help the business community to address issues in a focused manner and enable them to undertake engagement in a structured manner.

That children are the future of this planet;
that children walk this earth because we invited them to;
that children today live in a far complex and troubled world than before;
that they suffer hardship, neglect, callousness and torture;
and
that these children will do unto us tomorrow what we do unto them today;
are known, acknowledged and understood.

Yet, the indifference remains!

Indifferent parents, indifferent teachers, indifferent Society and ironically enough indifferent children themselves!

Indifferent business comes later, much later!

Numerous explanations for this lethargy abound. Some are centred on social architecture, some on asymmetric development models, some on politics, while some are pegged to economic deprivation. Explanations and solutions are copious and variegated, but it is generally agreed that in terms on ground realities, it remains 'work – in – progress' and regrettably will remain so for some time yet.

This house has erudite practitioners of rights of children from legal, moral and implementation perspectives and I leave it to them to expound on their experiences challenges and remedies to enhance effectiveness of existing frameworks, conventions and practices. I represent business and shall therefore limit my observations to how businesses can become more engaged in

implementing rights of children through these ten principles that are being formally launched today in this country.

Please bear with me as I present a ten – point agenda.

One, these ten principles of Children’s Rights are derived from internationally recognised human rights of children and do not create any new international legal obligations. Therefore in adopting these principles, businesses should rest assured that no new legal templates are to be created as their legal obligations remain unchanged. These ten principles create a framework for structured action and enable them to focus on areas such as child labour, young workers, protection & safety, products & services, marketing & advertising, environment & land acquisition, security, emergencies and reinforcing efforts of communities and government.

Two, adoption will need to follow a ‘top – down’ approach as the apex management will initially have to pledge support to these ten principles, frame appropriate overarching policies from which implementation templates will emerge and then position a clear governance structure to monitor effectiveness of their actions.

Three, moral rectitude of the apex management will be the key in staying the course as conflicting options will invariably be presented to them. For instance, on the one hand there is a burgeoning segment of children who are emerging as key ‘decision makers’ in family purchases and therefore need to be targeted by marketers, while on the other, responsible marketing & advertising as part of principle number six would need to be followed. A fine balancing – act would therefore be required as temptation to succumb would be enormous in a competitive business landscape.

Four, it would be possible to create embedded implementation templates as rights of children could be incorporated into the larger schema deployed toward protection & safety of workers, environment protection, land acquisition, emergencies, decent work conditions and security. These principles should therefore not be seen as new verticals, but as ‘add-ons’ to existing frameworks that businesses are otherwise obliged to follow.

Five, allocation of resources toward investing in these principles would be necessary. These resources would be skilled manpower with high ‘Emotional Quotient’, adequate funds, enabling equipment and support infrastructure. Crèches & play - classes within campuses for young working mothers, play – grounds, school buses and ambulances, children – friendly accommodation and schools for children of migrant workers are some examples.

Six, work practices of business partners and associates would need to be vetted to ensure compliance with these ten principles. As with ‘green’ and ‘ethical’ vendor chains, in this case too it would be necessary to secure their ‘buy – in’. This could be a calibrated process commencing with education and knowledge-sharing, followed by securing undertaking on implementation and eventually actually monitoring implementation. It will take time, patience and perseverance, but we will have to stay the course.

Seven, invest in children through Corporate Social Responsibility programmes. We in the Public Sector space invest 2 % of our profits on CSR and while the number is small in percentage terms, it is quite generous in absolute terms. The Private Sector too makes substantial social investment and it should be our endeavour that in adopting these ten principles, a segment of these funds are specifically targeted toward promoting the rights of children as espoused by these ten principles.

Eight, we have to be extremely sensitive of the rights of the ‘Young Worker’ as contained in principle number three. The ‘Young Workers’, a category clearly differentiated from regular

workers, are those who are yet in their formative years – physically, emotionally and intellectually. Though they are legally permitted to work, we should presume that they would do so from economic compulsions, as otherwise their future would be best secured by investing this time in education. These ‘Young Workers’ need special care to address their development needs. Apart from decent work and decent working conditions, opportunities to continue education, enhance skill development, providing mentorship and ensuring work – life balance are added responsibilities that businesses must address.

Nine, we in business have a duty to groom future leaders and to help inculcate in them sensitivity toward sustainability, inclusive growth, environment protection and ethical behaviour. We in the Global Compact implement this through the initiative on ‘Principles of Responsible Management Education’, abbreviated to “PRME” in which we engage with B – Schools to design appropriate syllabi and business cases as learning tools. Children’s rights would be a logical extension to this initiative and those of us that are aligned with this initiative would do well to ensure that these principles also find space in the customised learning products that we create for our future leadership.

Ten, businesses need to apportion a part of their resources to engage with society at – large through direct – contact programmes and multi – media advertising campaigns to further the cause of children rights. Building awareness is the key to enlisting support of all stakeholders towards balanced societal development and as message repetition creates positive reinforcements, gradual change will eventually emerge.

I am aware that this is merely an indicative list, but it does provide some guidance on implementation aspects and as this message spreads, this list will surely expand.

Before I conclude, I would like to re – visit the point I made earlier of children themselves being indifferent to the rights of children.

I was quite perturbed to read the Hindustan Times – C Fore moral health survey that was published this Sunday. Nearly 70 % though it was okay to be dishonest in order to succeed in life, a little over 40 % felt that it was fine to cheat one friend for another, 37 % were fine with sharing a classroom with lesser privileged children inducted under the RTE Act but would not ‘hang – out’ with them and 8 % felt that they should be taught separately. These preferences of children, though indicative, clearly articulate the need to engage with privileged children to enhance their acceptance of the rights of their less privileged peers.

Perhaps, here is a case for an eleventh prescription for businesses to promote the rights of children, but I leave it for another day.

Meanwhile, I thank you once again for investing your time and engaging with us on this most pressing issue and am hopeful that deliberations this afternoon will enable us to listen to and appreciate other perspectives and to learn from varied experiences in charting a long – term engagement strategy.

Thank you.
