

## Business & Human Rights

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A national Human Rights workshop has heard that while human rights are on the corporate agenda, they are managed largely in an ad hoc manner and there is little industry consensus on how to tackle the challenges they pose.

Ulrike Schuermann, the convenor of the Momentum Business and Human Rights Workshop in Sydney told the audience that the corporate responsibility movement has assisted in putting human rights on the business agenda.

She outlined the emergence of many voluntary codes and frameworks that have been taken up by business in some countries.

Schuermann says while most are voluntary and therefore very business friendly to entice participation - like the Global Compact – they are difficult to translate into practice for managers without human rights experience as they don't meet the complex, varied and ever-changing needs of the business world.

She says businesses need mechanisms subtle enough to function in a complex system, yet simple enough to be used by managers with little or no human rights experience.

She says the human rights movement, unlike the environmental movement, was slow to engage with the business sector and for a long time both viewed each other with mutual suspicion and in some cases still do.

The workshop heard that there are many intersections between human rights and corporate activities.

- Potential health impacts of products such as fast food, building materials, tobacco and mobile phones;
- The price and availability of important pharmaceuticals and issues related to the right to health and the right to life
- The potential human rights impact of supply chains (ethical sourcing)
- The mining of so called conflict diamonds and many others.

And while the significance of human rights has been recognised in relation to business activity in developing countries it also has application to business operating in Australia including in areas such as:

- Improving workplace conditions;
- Preventing racial, religious and gender discrimination;
- Guaranteeing freedom of association;
- Ensuring responsible marketing and product testing; and
- Promoting human rights by engaging with stakeholders and governments.
- Ethical supply chain management

Schuermann says it is the corporate sector which is responsible for its own actions – governments will be slow to move and need to be pushed by civil society.

For more information go to [www.momentumpartnerships.com](http://www.momentumpartnerships.com)

**Source:** Pro Bono Australia