

HONG KONG, HUMAN RIGHTS AND BUSINESS

Hong Kong's transition is an event of enormous consequence - for China, for the Asia-Pacific and for the international community. A successful handover will further enhance not only the opportunities for business between Hong Kong and China but also Hong Kong's strategic role in providing China's economy with financial backup and business know-how.

Human rights protection - the rule of law, government accountability and the free flow of information - will be an important factor in Hong Kong's continued stability, prosperity and competitiveness as a regional centre.

As a business operating from Hong Kong it is in your interest to ensure that human rights are respected. Safeguards for civil rights are the true basis for stable, long-term growth. Basic freedoms - including freedom of information and opinion - underpin Hong Kong's competitive advantage over other locations in China. Hong Kong's free and open society continues to attract and retain people with the best skills and talent. If human rights are disregarded, your company image and the interests of your employees and clients could be at risk.

In countries where your company operates, you take into account a number of essential features which ensure a level playing field for business. One of those features is the integrity of the legal system. There is a strong link between safeguards for human rights and the integrity of the legal system as a whole. Countries where human rights are respected are also those which strive to maintain and develop a fair judicial system, an independent judiciary, and equality before the law. Another feature is stability. Human rights violations are the root cause of political insecurity and economic disruption in many countries of the world. The undermining of civil and political freedoms people now enjoy could give rise to pressures and problems unknown in Hong Kong today.

Companies have responsibilities towards their employees and you can set an example to others by respecting and protecting the fundamental human rights of employees and business partners by encouraging freedom of association and expression in the workplace, and publicly adopting and implementing a non-discriminatory employment policy.

The process of development brings together the full range of human rights - civil, cultural, economic, political and social - into one indivisible and interdependent whole. Freedom from fear and freedom from want are the two sides of the same coin.

Quality and security of life cannot be measured solely in terms of GDP growth or per capita income. Genuine, sustainable development needs to embrace the place of individuals in civil society, their personal security and their capacity to determine and realise their potential. These are vital factors in the health of any market or investment environment.

As a business, you share responsibility for the protection and promotion of human rights: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights calls on "all organs of society", to join in this task. Because of the interrelationship of human rights protection and business protection, those campaigning for human rights are defending the rights of business people as well and should be given support in return. Hong Kong's business community should adopt codes of conduct to ensure that their operations include human rights protection and promotion. Act now rather than complaining about frustrations and complications later.

WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

- explicitly assess the human rights impact of projects and strategies you are involved in;
- use your influence to oppose the abuse of fundamental civil and political rights by states, especially where the pretext is either directly or indirectly business interests;
- develop mechanisms to monitor and maximise the enjoyment of human rights by your employees;
- publicly adopt and implement a non-discriminatory employment policy;
- provide channels for the freedom of expression, association and assembly in the workplace;
- develop mechanisms by which employees or members of the local community and non-government organisations can bring forward complaints of violations without fear, to be impartially investigated and where necessary acted upon
- do not engage in commercial activities which involve bonded or prison labour;
- issue strict guidelines to your private security personnel to respect human rights;
- respect intellectual property rights as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
- if you are a member of a business group in Hong Kong, such as a chamber of commerce or a professional association, set up a human rights working group to consider ways of better safeguarding human rights in the workplace and in society at large and advance collective positions on these issues to government authorities.

WHAT AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CAN DO FOR YOU

Amnesty International can provide your company with:

- up-to-date information on human rights;
- information on national legislation and international standards affecting human rights, including those that impact upon the responsibilities of companies;
- advice on models for codes of conduct and business responsibility;
- contacts in Amnesty International's international business network;
- assistance in relation to human rights violations against you or your employees.

For more detailed materials on the role of Business in Human rights, or for general information please contact:

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