

Health, Business and Human Right -- Working Group Proposal

David Wofford

Dear Working Group Members,

We would like to provide input into next week's meeting on thematic issues and achieving the task. We would like to suggest the theme of health and business for the long-term, if it is not possible to consider it for the immediate meeting.

Overall worker (and community) health -- and not simply occupational health and safety -- has not been addressed in the business and human rights debates despite the significant international rights language that exists on right to health, medical care, etc. This is not surprising given the view of many health organizations and other stakeholders that health care is the responsibility of government, not business.

Thus, there has been a single focus (in OECD, Global Compact etc) on occupational health and safety, an important yet narrow area.

We suggest that under the Respect, Protect and Remedy framework, broader health concerns, including women's health and reproductive rights, should be a major thematic area for the United Nations work on business and human rights.

Multinational corporations and their suppliers have multiple impacts on -- and thus shoulder varying degrees of responsibility for -- the health of workers and the surrounding communities. Under the framework, the business responsibility stems from direct or indirect impacts for worker and community health when, for example, they:

- Attract internal migrants or recruit transnational migrants for work in factories and farms, away from social and health support systems, thereby creating conditions that may harm health (from gender-based violence to sexual contact to spread of diseases) or limit access to needed services

- Provide worker's housing and meals, which gives them implicit responsibility for related social issues, like health.

- Require work hours that make it all but impossible for workers to access public (or private) health services outside the workplace and lack policies and practices that enable workers to seek services.

- Develop extractive and other projects that disrupts the social and economic balance in communities, places added pressure on public health services, and creates the conditions for the spread of disease and increase in gender-based violence.

- Neglect to share health data on their workers to national public health authorities that would help government track and analyze disease vectors within a country and manage health resources adequately.

Business plays a vital role in developing countries in creating jobs, transferring skills and standards, and, yes, providing health services. Yet access to health services and information is not only a central human right but also a central part of development and poverty reduction.

We would propose that the Working Group make overall health under the UN Human Rights and Business Framework a key thematic area. Health is a public (state) responsibility, but also business concern and human rights responsibility, if the framework has any real meaning.

There are practical reasons to make overall health as a human rights and business a theme:

1. After 20 plus years of public-private partnerships, there are many successful and applicable models that the UN could promote as examples of business respecting and remedying health rights.

2. Health care of workers involves a business case, unlike many other human rights areas -- addressing women's health and preventive diseases improves worker productivity. (Meridian Group has produced several workplace studies on the Return on Investment from factory investments in workplace health services, most recently as a partner of the HERproject, managed by Business for Social Responsibility. www.herproject.org)

3. Health is a logical area for public-private partnerships that address a human right -- health -- in which many government alone are unable to do so.

We applaud the Working Group's mission and hope to be able to contribute throughout the process. By way of background, the RAISE Health Initiative, which I direct, is a new USAID-funded project to promote women's health in corporate global standards, supply chains, and workplace monitoring systems.

Best Regards,

David Wofford

David Wofford
Project Director, RAISE Health Initiative for Workers, Companies and Communities
Vice President for Public-Private Partnerships
Meridian Group International, Inc.
1250 24th Street NW, Suite 350
Washington, DC 20037