



Factsheet: Business and human rights

Background Information

A company's operations can have negative and positive impacts on many people, including employees, customers, suppliers and their employees, and communities. To address these impacts a growing number of Australian companies voluntarily incorporate human rights into their practices and policies. Businesses have made commitments to promote diversity and equality. Examples include Reconciliation Action Plans (to promote Indigenous equality), Disability Action Plans, and specific measures to promote gender equality, diversity on the basis of race as well as sexual orientation, gender identity and intersex status.

A number of Australian businesses are signatories to the UN Global Compact and form part of the Global Compact Network Australia (GCNA). GCNA members include business stakeholders ranging from multinationals and top 200 companies down to smaller enterprises. The GCNA support human rights by abiding by the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. The GCNA has also established an Indigenous Engagement Working Group which promotes the importance of positive Indigenous engagement and provides a platform to share leading practices and collectively advance Indigenous rights in Australia.¹

Key Issue – Lack of a national action plan

A key challenge identified in the 2014 Australian Dialogue on Business and Human Rights was the lack of policy coherence across business, civil society and government.² A National Action Plan would enable a concerted approach to address the human rights issues facing businesses and promote greater implementation of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

Recommendation

Government formulate a National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights, in consultation with key stakeholders.

Key Issue – Complexity in discrimination law

Significant technical and operational differences exist between laws around age, race, sex and disability discrimination. These inconsistencies make it difficult for businesses, particularly small businesses, to understand their obligations under the law. The majority of complaints made to the Commission involve businesses in their role as an employer or service provider. There is a need for Government to support business to understand these laws and prevent discrimination.³

Recommendation

Government consider options to reduce complexity and improve consistency of discrimination protections across Australia, to clarify businesses' obligations and support best practice.

¹ GCNA, *Global Compact Network Australia*. At <http://www.unglobalcompact.org.au/about-us/global-compact-network-australia/> (viewed 22 June 2015)

² GCNA & Australian Human Rights Commission, *Australian Dialogue on Business and human Rights – Summary and Outcomes Document*, p 9. At <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/2014DialogueSummary.pdf> (viewed 22 June 2015)

³ Australian Human Rights Commission, *Annual Report 2013-14*, p 132. At <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/commission-general/publications/annual-report-2013-14> (viewed 22 June 2015).