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Phil Bloomer – The potential of measuring business and human rights

Damiano de Felice

This post was contributed by Phil Bloomer, Executive Director of the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre. Phil was previously director of campaigns and policy at Oxfam GB.

I believe 'Measuring Business & Human Rights' (MB&HR) as another milestone in the current rapid evolution of this vital area of human progress.

Business and human rights, as an issue, is at least as old as the anti-slavery struggle, where an international movement sought to transform government and company's treatment of human beings as chattels. But in the last twenty years, partly in response to rapid globalisation, there has been a growth of a diverse movement to bring human rights into the core of companies' business models.

Ironically, one of the most transformative asks of companies has been the apparently soft demand for 'transparency' in their own actions and supply chains. This is core to the [Business & Human Rights Resource Centre](#)'s work in tracking 5,600 companies around the world. Transparency brings with it the opportunity to measure. And company executives value measurement enormously because of its power to enhance their competitive edge. This is summed up by the performance improvement consultant, H. James Harrington, who said "Measurement is the first step that leads to control and eventually to improvement. If you can't measure something, you can't understand it. If you can't understand it, you can't control it. If you can't control it, you can't improve it."

And once companies start to provide data on their human rights performance, then the challenge arises as to how to measure that performance in a "robust and fair" fashion so improvements can be made. This measurement is not an end in itself. Rather, it must promote progress on human rights by holding companies to account for their impact: praising their progress, criticising their harm, and seeking redress for victims of abuse.

As we know, "fair and robust measurement" is highly controversial: like "beauty" it is in the eye of the beholder. So, this new MB&HR programme marks a new and important phase of business and human rights as the project seeks to systematise, analyse, and synthesise the experience of measurement so far, and helps bring greater objectivity, and awareness of limitations, to the measurement that are made. I believe the insights that MB&HR are already bringing to the field are of immense value – they highlight the power of comparable data; the difficulties of objectivity; and the dangers of unforeseen consequences and a fetish of measurement.

William Bruce Cameron said that "not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted". As MB&HR points out, we need to employ the enormous power of measurement for progress on human rights, but be equally alert to its limitations. And the power of measurement, and particularly comparable measurement, to catalyse progress on human rights has been illustrated recently by the Access to Medicines Index and Oxfam's 'Behind the Brands'.

The [Access to Medicines Index](#) brings rigorous measurement across 106 indicators to compare and independently rank the performance of the top 20 research-based pharmaceutical companies on their effort to improve access to medicine in developing countries. It is not involved in campaigning, but its information and judgements are mercilessly exploited by campaigners, and it has the support of 31 investment houses worth around \$4.4 trillion – which concentrates the minds of the companies' executives.

Again, healthy competition around their biannual ranking has catalysed substantial action inside some companies to deliver access to medicines for the poor. Bringing human rights to the core of companies' business model is a fundamental challenge in the struggle to achieve human rights and a more sustainable and equal world. Enhancing our comparative measurement of companies' performance is a vital condition for achieving the necessary changes. It is also essential we remain wise to which measures matters, and what measurement can and can't tell us about what is happening to poor and vulnerable people whose prospects and human rights are transformed, for better or ill, by companies and their supply chains.

Oxfam's [Behind the Brands](#) measures and ranks the top ten food and beverage manufacturers on seven human rights criteria: from discrimination against women, to land and water rights, to workers' rights and, of course, transparency. The combination of a competitive ranking, based on a rigorous assessment of human rights and development policy, with a powerful campaigning machine has shown remarkable achievements in a very short time. Most recently, Oxfam persuaded Coca Cola to commit to "zero tolerance" of land grabs in their supply chains (in an environment where sugar plantations are implicated in

land grabs across Africa and Asia). And now they are asking the same of Pepsi and ABF. This highlights the strategy they use to create a healthy, if uncomfortable, competition between companies.

MB&HR has the opportunity and power to help us maximise the impact of measurement on human rights, while keeping us honest about the limitations of the tape measure.

Phil Bloomer

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