Mary Robinson: Human rights are good for business

By Grace Segran

Mary Robinson remains an uncompromising voice for human rights. The former Irish president and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights asserted the central importance of human rights in achieving a more just and sustainable future at the Net Impact conference here on sustainable prosperity, and explored with some 400 participants how they can help remind the world that human rights belong to all people and are their shared responsibility.

"That future can only come about through greater adherence to the rule of law within and between nations, through more effective and democratic states – and no less important, through wider participation by all sectors, including civil society and business, in meeting shared responsibilities and holding governments to account for their obligations," she says.

Net Impact brings together corporate leaders, civil society representatives and business students with the aim of developing a community of new leaders who will make a positive impact on society.

The architect and president of **Realizing Rights: The Ethical Globalization Initiative**, Robinson says that Realizing Rights has been focusing on the need for the private sector to recognise and act on its responsibilities in making globalisation a positive force for all – and that includes respecting human rights.

Robinson spoke to INSEAD Knowledge about corporate social responsibility (CSR) and human rights on the sidelines of the conference.

Knowledge: When we think of CSR, we normally think of issues such as CO2 emissions and supply chains. Where do human rights, traditionally accepted as the government's responsibility to protect, fit in the business arena? What is the connection between human rights and CSR?

Robinson: More and more business leaders understand that many of the issues they address already are of direct relevance to human rights. For example, corporate equal opportunity and anti-discrimination programmes are in fact addressing human rights issues: non-discrimination is a fundamental human right. The same is true of workplace labour standards and 'health and safety' policies – labour rights and the right to the highest attainable standard of health are fundamental rights spelled out in international human rights instruments. So I see a growing recognition that human rights are part of core business activities and that the private sector helps provide the enabling environment needed for the enjoyment of human rights.

At the same time, company operations can have serious negative impacts on the protection of human rights when they are not carried out in a responsible manner. And many businesses have to struggle with the challenges of working in unstable political and social environments where human rights and the rule of law are not respected. This of course poses threats to employees' well-being. But it also makes operating responsibly in terms of relations with governments and communities more difficult and limits opportunities for building new markets and contributing to sustainable futures for people living in poverty. So the challenges for business in addressing human rights are significant.

Are companies really willing to accept responsibility for human rights?

There is now broad agreement that the private sector should do its part to help ensure respect for human rights around the world. In fact, a new report

by John Ruggie, the UN Special Representative on business and human rights makes clear that all corporations have a responsibility to respect all human rights which at minimum means 'do no harm.' This report has been widely accepted by business, government and civil society representatives.

I see more and more business leaders from the global North and South showing that they are ready to take on their appropriate role in ensuring respect for human rights. And some leading companies are committed to using a human rights framework to help shape more principled and profitable corporate performance.

I think the 'business case' for integrating human rights into corporate responsibility policies is clear. Business leaders recognise that managing legal and operational risk and reputation, meeting shareholder and stakeholder expectations and maintaining and motivating staff performance are all good reasons for taking human rights concerns seriously.

How are human rights issues being addressed directly in the business agenda today?

Human rights are increasingly part of internal ethical statements, corporate codes of conduct, sectoral agreements on issues such as child labour in the clothing industry or security concerns in the extractive industry. You can see it as well in UN-backed efforts like the Global Compact, which now has over 3,000 company participants and in initiatives such as the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme (a joint government, industry and civil society initiative) – set up to stem the flow of conflict diamonds. And you can see it in the work of projects like the Business Leaders Initiative on Human Rights, an alliance of major companies I'm proud to chair which is committed to integrating the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights into corporate policies and practices and to serving as global advocates for human rights concerns in the wider business community.

How do you see CSR in the next decade?

I believe public demands on companies to demonstrate responsible behaviour will only increase in the years to come. Business managers who view human rights and other social issues as just philanthropy and don't integrate them into core business operations will face a growing number of legal and reputational risks.
That is where business schools and networks like Net Impact have a vital role

to play. I think it is fair to say that although corporate responsibility and sustainability have entered the academic field, there is still a great deal to be done to embed these approaches in the mainstream of business education.

I believe the manager of the future will be someone who is able to incorporate human rights and other ethical issues into her decision-making. This will not only be good for business over the long term, but it will also be a powerful force in realising all human rights for all.

Net Impact held its first European conference in Geneva on June 12-14 2008.

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