

Discussion brief – involving children and children’s rights in business

March 2023

Written by: Skage Steinsson Lem (UNICEF Norway) & Elise Naalsund (UNICEF Norway)

Technical reviewers and contributors: Celie Manuel (UNICEF Denmark), Maureen Hymøller (UNICEF Denmark), Lulu Li (UNICEF Sweden), Outi Kauppinen (UNICEF Finland), Nina Schefte (Hydro) & Global Child Forum

Special thanks to: Representatives from Hydro, Telenor, LEGO Group, Ørsted, Novo Nordisk, IKEA, Sandvik Coromant, H&M Group, Toca Boca and Telia Company

The dialogues and materials from the fourth Virtual Nordic Business Roundtable held in January 2023, on the theme **Stakeholder engagement and child participation**, deliver this discussion brief’s key content and outcomes. 18 participants from 10 leading Nordic companies from various industries participated in the Roundtable, which UNICEF Norway and Hydro co-organized. This was the final session in a series of four virtual Business Roundtables co-created by the Nordic UNICEF offices (Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden), to mark the 10th Anniversary of the Children’s Rights and Business Principles (CRBP)¹.

The objective of the roundtable was to focus on how businesses can integrate children’s rights and involve children in their decision-making. To achieve this, the discussions circled around why, when, with whom, and how businesses should engage stakeholders on children’s rights issues. The two discussions specifically focused on directly and indirectly engaging children as stakeholders and rights-holders, either through child participation or consultation with child rights experts. This discussion brief summarizes the key themes and findings that emerged during the discussion, which were all held under the Chatham House Rules.

Disclaimer: The key themes and findings highlighted in this discussion brief are recollections and reflections from the roundtable dialogues. They do not necessarily represent the view or position of UNICEF or of participating businesses.

Key Lessons

- Businesses need increased awareness and more in-house training on child rights and safeguarding across the organization.
- Relying on cooperation and partnerships with UNICEF, NGOs, and other child rights experts enables businesses to have the necessary safeguarding measures in place when consulting children. This ensures children are kept safe and the consultation is done in a meaningful way, while also opening for businesses to get valuable insight from children's perspectives.
- By leveraging partnerships, businesses can also get a better understanding of their operating context and how their business activities, products, and services affect children. Businesses can obtain information on how they can improve their impact assessments, social sustainability, and subsequent decision-making.
- New EU regulations, guidelines, and target-setting requirements are good opportunities for businesses to create a stronger focus on sustainability that can include child rights.

1. Background and context

Children have the same fundamental human rights as adults. However, because of children's unique needs and vulnerabilities, some additional rights apply only to children. These rights are elaborated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, recognizing the interdependence of their civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. With approximately 2.4² billion children on earth, business activities could adversely impact children's rights, even though they might not affect the rights of adults. Among other areas, businesses can impact children's rights through occurrences of child exploitation, violence, and abuse or the prevalence of illegal child labour³. In fact, hundreds of millions of boys and girls remain at risk of online exploitation and abuse. Business operations could also affect children's health.

Today, more than 800 million children are exposed to dangerous lead poisoning, mainly due to business practices failing to recycle lead-acid batteries properly⁴.

In a business context, children should be considered both as rights holders and stakeholders, as companies interact with them daily, as part of the community, end users of their products, children of employees, or even as workers. Despite this, children are often left out of companies' decision-making and risk assessments.

For businesses to address their actual impact on children, they must adopt a child rights lens throughout their business activities.

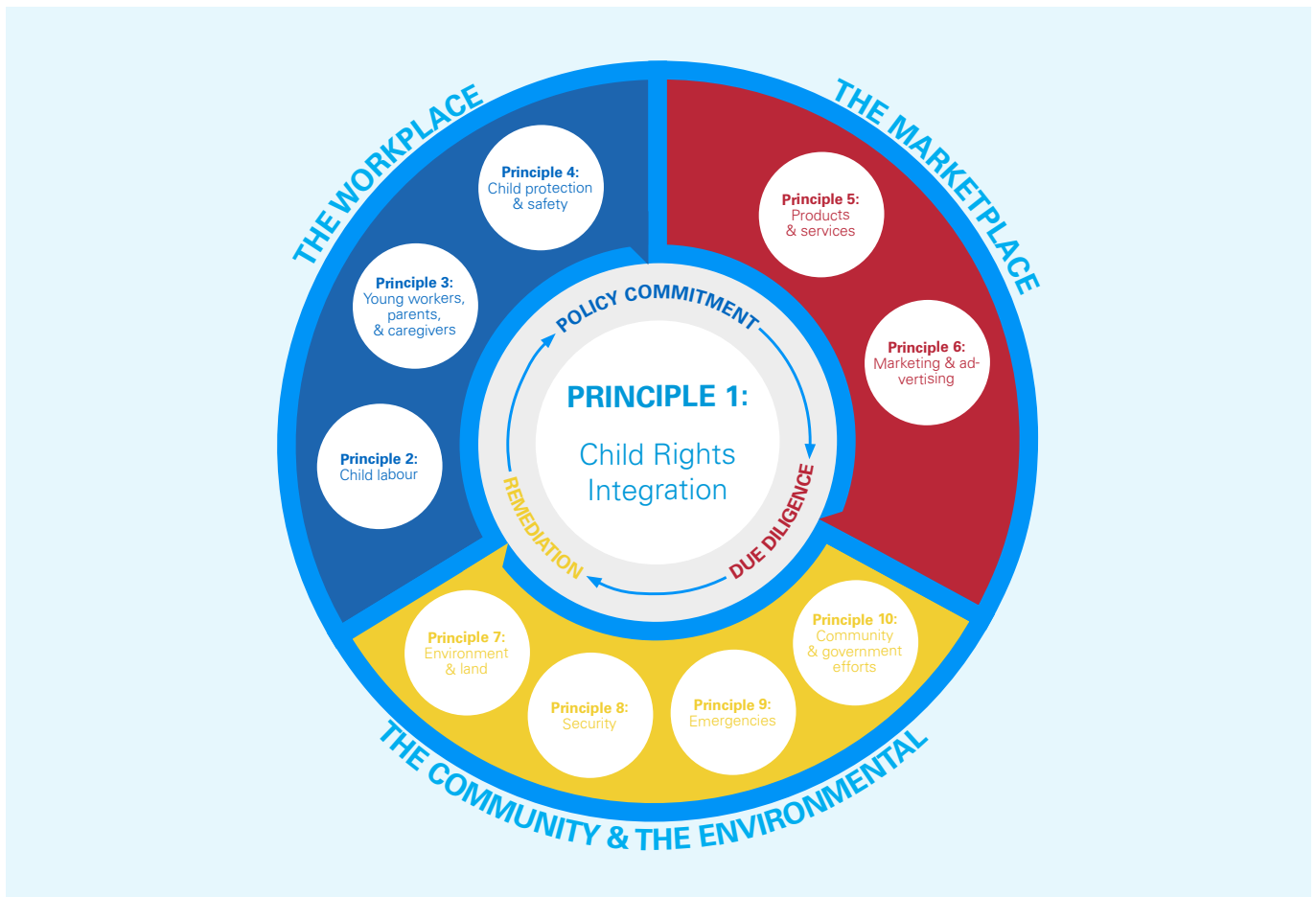


On 5 November 2014, a boy walks from school to his house in Aberao village in South Tarawa, Kiribati. Kiribati is one of the countries most affected by sea level rise. During high tide many villages become inundated making large parts of the villages uninhabitable.

2. Adopting a child rights lens in business

The Children’s Rights and Business Principles outline tangible areas and actions for businesses to respect and support children’s rights. To respect children’s rights, businesses should avoid any infringement of the human rights of others, including children, and address any adverse human rights impact with which the business is involved. The corporate responsibility to respect applies to the business’s own activities and to its business relationships,

linked to its operations, products, or services. The CRBP also urge businesses to support children’s rights through voluntary actions that seek to advance human rights, including children’s rights, through core business activities, strategic social investments and philanthropy, advocacy, and public policy engagement, and working in partnership and other collective action⁵.



As a first step, integrating children’s rights in policies and codes of conduct could help businesses communicate expectations clearly, internally, and externally, and lay the foundation for strategically working with children’s rights throughout the business. After integrating children’s rights into policies and codes of conduct, businesses should include children’s rights in their due diligence processes. This can be through incorporated human rights efforts or through separate child rights impact assessments. Most businesses tend to limit their due diligence and impact assessments to only addressing child labour, while in reality, children are affected – and their rights neglected

– in many other areas. This includes areas such as product design and advertising, the behaviour of staff or subcontractors towards children, community resettlement and children’s rights in the supply and value chain⁶. In the process of identifying impacts on children’s rights, businesses should perform a consultation process with relevant stakeholders to ensure root causes of impacts are addressed, children’s perspectives are considered, and the rights causes of action are implemented. In this discussion brief, we will focus on consultations and stakeholder engagement on children’s rights.

For businesses to understand their operating context and adopt a child rights lens, they should engage with experts on children's rights and in certain circumstances it may be relevant to consult children directly. With an increased

focus on social sustainability and human rights, identifying children as key stakeholders and integrating their rights in due diligence, materiality analyses, and risk assessments hold a number of benefits. These include:

- **Listening, understanding, and responding** to children's unique opinions, views, experiences, and information that can be useful to business in conducting human rights due diligence.
- **Obtaining information** about child rights impacts that can also serve as an early indicator or 'red flag' to a company of its broader human rights risk.
- **Providing insight** on how companies can mitigate risks or how to address opportunities to advance children's rights.
- **Building trust** and long-lasting relationships among wider communities and avoiding unnecessary grievances and reducing potential for community conflict.
- **Ensuring that children are regarded as equal stakeholders** and demonstrate commitment to taking children's views and welfare seriously⁷.

Businesses may engage many different stakeholders to respect and support children's rights. For businesses to treat children as a key stakeholder group, or assess how children are impacted by their business activities, experts through NGOs, advocates or local civil society organisations can be useful. Engaging children

directly will most often not be necessary and should in any case always be done in consultation with experts to avoid risks of harm to children. However, lessons from companies with experience in child participation are included in section 4.



Child playing in a landfill in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.

More than 300 million tons of plastic are produced every year around the world, yet just a fraction of is recycled. Children around the world face the impact of pollution and are more vulnerable than adults to air, water and land pollution.

3. Integrating children's rights in business through partnership with organisations that have child rights expertise

The dialogues focused on how businesses can respect and support children's rights through consultation and engagement with organisations that have child rights expertise. By doing so, businesses have the chance to indirectly consult children, which could give

businesses a unique insight into how children are impacted by their business activities and how they can work with children's rights. The discussion revealed the following challenges raised by the participants:

Key challenges:

- **The difficulty in raising internal awareness of children's rights across the organization was raised as a key challenge.** With children's rights not being explicitly mentioned in many human rights due diligence regulations, companies may not prioritize this work in their strategy as this would be moving beyond what is necessary. Instead, companies may choose to embed the minimum requirements of current regulations, and thus exclude children's rights.
- **The trouble in reaching out to children in local communities through established stake holders' channels and processes.** In some cases, local community leaders may attempt to speak on behalf of children in a specific area, without having the necessary information to fully represent children's voices and opinions.
- **Furthermore, companies also expressed their concerns about children's online safety as a big challenge.** Children spend more time online today and are therefore constantly exposed to online threats. Because of this, participants raised the challenge of how to protect children from violence, exploitation, and abuse online through their products and websites.



As much as these above-mentioned key points are challenges, the participants also expressed that they represent opportunities for businesses to advance children's rights. The following

represents opportunities raised by the participants on how to involve children's rights and views in business and engage stakeholders:

Key opportunities:

- **Though children's rights are not explicitly mentioned, the participants saw the upcoming EU regulations and target-setting requirements as opportunities for businesses.** A stronger focus on sustainability makes it easier for companies to set concrete goals and strategies that can include children's rights. For instance, one company mentioned that more customers are demanding that businesses implement human rights due diligence and show how they mitigate negative impacts in the supply chain, before signing any agreements or contracts. Another opportunity derived from the discussions was the need for more in-house training for all employees on child rights to raise awareness across the organization. Likewise, the board needs to be engaged to make this happen.
- **Companies often need more expertise to understand when to engage with children and how to make the exchange mutually meaningful.** For instance, children may have expectations of the outcomes of such consultations that are unrealistic for companies, which could lead to disappointments. Interacting with children directly also entails various risks concerning their safeguarding. With the lack of sufficient safeguarding tools and policies, it is harder for companies to consult directly with children. Therefore, most of the companies saw the opportunity to cooperate with, and some already had partnerships with UNICEF national committees, NGOs, and other child rights experts when consulting children. Relying on these partnerships enables them to steer in the right direction when consulting children, as well as making sure children are kept safe.
- **Leveraging partnerships was also mentioned as an opportunity to better understand how business activities, as well as products and services affect children.** By engaging child rights experts' companies could for instance obtain information on how they can improve their online presence, websites, and products to be more inclusive and safer for children. Through partnerships, companies could also provide digital safety programs for children.



In March, 2022 in Iraq, children play table football inside a child-friendly space in Shekhan camp for internally displaced persons.

Child-friendly spaces help children in Iraq to overcome the impact of conflict by providing them with opportunities to heal the scars of war in a safe and secure environment.

4. Child participation

The dialogues also focused on how businesses can engage directly with children and how to ensure that such consultations are done in a safe and inclusive way. When consulting children directly, the most important requirement is ensuring that the consultations are meaningful and safely executed. This requires stringent

safeguarding measures, which can be considered through the help of NGOs and other child rights experts. Most of the companies discussing this topic were familiar with and had done several direct engagements with children already. Still, some challenges emerged during the discussions:

Key challenges:

- **The most common challenge among the participants was the lack of knowledge on how to engage directly with children and ensure that this is done safely.** People are not necessarily aware of the safeguarding measures and requirements that need to be in place before consulting children. As a result, a challenge that was raised was the issue of people wanting to get things done quickly and on short notice, without understanding the safeguarding measures needed beforehand.
- **Another topic raised was how to co-create with children.** One participant mentioned that they gathered feedback from children to ensure a two-way conversation. However, it was also mentioned that it was difficult to balance the need for feedback and the need to keep children safe. The discussion touched upon product development stages and when it would be safe and appropriate to include children. Although many of the companies had successfully and safely gathered feedback from children on products and services, a challenge that was raised was how they can ensure that the feedback is gathered from a diverse group of children.



Both facilitators and the participants expressed the importance of consulting experts when engaging directly with children, to keep safeguarding measures intact. With these intact, however, opportunities were raised by the participants:

Key opportunities:

- **When consulting children directly, companies have the chance to understand children’s experiences and improve their work.** For instance, one of the companies invited several children to present a topic of their own choice, to the board, and opened for them to ask questions. In this case, the company made sure that there were always safeguarding experts present, as well as the children’s parents. This was highlighted as a valuable chance for the company to learn from children and let children feel heard and included in their decision-making.
- **Another opportunity raised on direct engagement was the chance to get direct feedback on, for example, products or strategies.** Adults may have an idea of what children would want to use; however, it is difficult for adults to foresee everything. As an example, one company had initiated product testing with children, and what they thought was a good product, ended up not being of interest to the children at all. Establishing good product testing processes and including children from the early stages of testing ideas and concepts, to later in focus groups to test the actual product, could therefore be valuable. As mentioned above, however, this would require assessing the associated risks, so that children are not included too early in the process with risk of harm.



UNICEF/UN0643878

5. Moving forward with the Children's Rights and Business Principles

The Children's Rights and Business Principles were launched in 2012, and since then there has been progress – but not nearly enough. The report, *Charting the Course*⁵, outlines how far we have come, as well as what is needed in the coming decade. The report especially calls upon the business world, governments, and

other stakeholders to raise the visibility and strengthen the integration of children's rights in responsible business conduct. The report also highlights several tangible measures that are needed to reinforce children's rights in business and some of these are shown below:

- Listening to children and their legitimate representatives.
- Ensuring that the basic design standard of human rights and environmental due diligence and other mechanisms and processes for the integration of human rights into responsible business conducts, capture the human rights of those most at risk of marginalization – especially children.
- Removing barriers hindering children from accessing the help they need.
- Moving beyond compliance. Addressing salient adverse impacts is the essence of the business' responsibility to respect the rights of children.
- Developing outcome-oriented ESG indicators for children.
- Improving the evidence base and building capacities for enhanced understanding and knowledge-sharing as an essential foundation of effective action for children.





For more information

Skage Steinsson Lem | UNICEF NORWAY | skage.lem@unicef.no

References

¹Children's Rights and Business Principles (2012),
<https://www.unicef.org/media/96136/file/Childrens-Rights-Business-Principles-2012.pdf>

²UNICEF Data (2022), <https://data.unicef.org/how-many/how-many-children-are-in-the-world/>

³Engaging Stakeholders on Children's Rights: A tool for companies (2014),
<https://www.unicef.org/thailand/media/2631/file/Engaging%20stakeholders%20on%20children's%20rights%20EN.pdf>

⁴Charting the Course: Embedding children's rights in responsible business conduct (2022),
<https://www.unicef.org/media/129596/file/Charting%20The%20Course.pdf>

⁵Children's Rights and Business Principles (2012),
<https://www.unicef.org/media/96136/file/Childrens-Rights-Business-Principles-2012.pdf>

⁶Children's Rights in Impact Assessments: A guide for integrating children's rights into impact assessments and taking action for children (2013),
https://sites.unicef.org/csr/css/Children_s_Rights_in_Impact_Assessments_Web_161213.pdf

⁷Engaging Stakeholders on Children's Rights: A tool for companies (2014),
<https://www.unicef.org/thailand/media/2631/file/Engaging%20stakeholders%20on%20children's%20rights%20EN.pdf>

⁸Charting the Course: Embedding children's rights in responsible business conduct (2022),
<https://www.unicef.org/media/129596/file/Charting%20The%20Course.pdf>

Children's Rights and Business Workbook,
<https://globalchildforum.org/childrens-rights-and-business-workbook/>

Children's Participation Guide,
[Children's Participation Guide https://globalchildforum.org/childrens-participation-guide/](https://globalchildforum.org/childrens-participation-guide/)