

Guidelines for interviews with civil society actors

Application note

The guide provides support for interviews with civil society actors. It is structured along the five phases of the Due Diligence Compass. The questions are to be understood as an orientation; feel free to adopt, adapt or expand them. Similarly, you can select the questions that are relevant to you depending on your interests and objectives. The list does not necessarily have to be used as a whole. You can also determine (with the interviewee) the degree to which the interview should be structured, i.e. to what extent you want to follow the questions closely or use them as suggestions. Both options are possible.

Introduction

Communication with civil society actors can be helpful for numerous reasons. Many civil society organisations deal intensively with corporate due diligence and bring knowledge about, for example, industry- or country-related environmental and human rights risks to the discussion. They are also aware of success factors for grievance mechanisms and may have direct contact with (potentially) affected parties in countries of the Global South. As a company, take advantage of this opportunity for discussion.

Tips for conducting interviews

Do's

- Clarify in advance for yourself and with the interview partners what the expectations are for the interview.
- Treat your conversation partners with respect. This relates to how you treat each other in the conversation, but also how you value each other's time. Good preparation (e.g. sending the questionnaire, information about your risk analysis, measures, etc.) and clear questions form the foundation for this mutual respect.
- Try to understand civil society's perspective on the issue and build a bridge. In practice, both sides can learn a lot from each other.

Don'ts

- Don't expect free advice. Civil society organisations are willing to share their knowledge. However, this does not mean that you have a right to comprehensive, individual advice.
- Do not close yourself off to (constructive) criticism. Dealing with the topic of corporate due diligence along the value chain means being open, learning, and listening to tips and criticism.
- Do not be careless with data protection and confidentiality. Formally, you are bound by the General Data Protection Regulation. But think further: in the worst case scenario, negligence can put people at risk (e.g. people who work for an international supplier and make a complaint).

Phase 1: Develop strategy

Goal

Find out:

- What civil society actors generally expect from a company in your sector or field of activity and size,
- What civil society actors already know about your company, and
- What civil society actors expect from you in terms of strategic orientation.

Questions

- What *challenges* do you see in implementing human rights due diligence in sector [...] or in the fields of activity [...]?
- Can you give us *good practice examples* for the implementation of human rights due diligence in sector [...] or in the fields of activity [...]?
- Which *stakeholders or potentially affected parties* are particularly relevant for a company in our industry or in the fields of activity [...]?
- What *sources of information* would you recommend for implementing human rights due diligence in our industry or fields of activity?

- Are you familiar with our *sustainability strategy (or policy statement, environmental policy, code of conduct)*?
- If so, how do you rate them?
- Would you like to see us address other issues in the policy statement or our environmental policy (or code of conduct), or raise the issues in a different way?
- Which international human rights reference instruments should be explicitly referred to in the declaration of principles?
- To which other relevant stakeholders or potentially affected stakeholders should the policy statement be communicated?

Phase 2: Analyse risks

Goal

Find out:

- The extent to which the results of your risk analysis (if you have already conducted one) match the perceived risks of civil society, and
- How civil society assesses the risk potential of your business activities.

Questions

- What *human rights risks* do you associate with our business activities?
- Where do you locate these risks along the value chain?
- Which of these risks do you consider to be particularly high?

- What *environmental risks* do you associate with our business activities?

- Where do you locate these risks along the value chain?
- Which of these risks do you consider to be particularly high?

- Which *groups* are potentially affected in our industry or in our fields of activity?
- Which regions would you rate as *conflict and high-risk regions* in our industry or in our fields of activity, and why?
- Which context-dependent factors such as political framework conditions, vulnerable groups (e.g. indigenous populations) should we take into account in particular in these regions?
- Do you have partner organisations on site? Can you recommend local organisations?

- Are you familiar with our *risk analysis* (if any)?
- If yes, in your view, have we identified all relevant risks along the value chain?
- How do you assess our risk prioritisation? Can you understand it?
- Are there other human rights reference instruments that we should take into account in the risk analysis? If so, which ones?
- Are there other stages of the value chain that we should analyse in terms of human rights risks? If so, which ones?
- Are there other potentially affected groups that we should consider in the analysis process? If so, which ones?
- What sources of information would you recommend for conducting the human rights risk analysis? Which sources of information would you recommend for the consideration of particularly high risks (in the sense of an in-depth examination)?

Phase 3: Take action

Goal

Find out:

- How your implemented measures (including effectiveness) are evaluated, and
- What further measures, if any, the respective civil society actor would like to see.

Questions

- Do you find our measures adequate to avoid or mitigate (potential or actual) *negative impacts on human rights and the environment*?
- Why do you find one or more measures inappropriate and what would you have liked us to do as an alternative?
- Do these measures provide redress in the event of actual negative effects?
- Should we enter into a dialogue on this with (other) stakeholders as part of the effectiveness review?

- Are they familiar with *audit procedures* in our industry or fields of activity? If yes,
- How do you evaluate these audits?

- What challenges do you see?
- What do you think makes good *training* for a company in our industry, size or areas of operation?
- Which employees (and partners) should preferably be trained?
- Which human rights and environmental aspects should be addressed?
- Are certain formats and/or channels recommended?
- Can you give us good practice examples on this?
- Are you familiar with our training courses (if any)? If yes, how do you rate them?

Phase 4: Measure and report

Goal

Find out:

- Whether your company uses appropriate indicators to evaluate the impact of measures,
- Whether your company's measures are effective,
- The extent to which your reporting is received in external communication, and
- Which communication formats and channels the respective target group would like to see.

Questions

- In your view, have we chosen *appropriate indicators* to evaluate the impact of measures?
- If not, what indicators do you suggest?
- Were our measures successful (or effective) in your view?
- What *sources of information* do you use when you want to find out about our corporate guidelines and measures in the area of sustainability?
- Are you familiar with the *policy statement/sustainability report* on our website, etc.?
 - If so, do you find them sufficiently informative?
 - If not, what information are you missing?
- Do you think that we provide the information in a user-friendly way?
 - If so, which format do you particularly like?
 - If not, what communication format would you like to see?
- Do you find the time intervals of external reporting adequate?
 - If not, at what intervals do you think external reporting should take place?

Phase 5: Managing grievances

Goal

Find out:

- How civil society actors evaluate the grievance mechanism (if already in place),
- What criteria civil society sets for an effective grievance mechanism, and
- How a grievance mechanism can be made more effective.

Questions

- What do you think makes a *good grievance mechanism* for a company in our industry, in our fields of activity, and our size?
- Are you familiar with *external grievance procedures* at the association level or as part of an industry initiative in our industry or fields of activity?
- If so, in your view, does the external [grievance mechanism](#) meet the [criteria for an effective mechanism](#)?
- In *what form* (internal grievance procedure, external grievance procedure at association level or as part of an industry initiative) would you recommend a grievance procedure for a company in our industry or fields of activity and size?
- Are you familiar with *our grievance mechanism* (if any)? If yes, do you find that it sufficiently meets the following [effectiveness criteria](#)?
 - Dialogue orientation
 - Legitimacy
 - Accessibility
 - Predictability
 - Balance
 - Transparency
 - Rights compatibility
 - Source of continuous learning
- Why do you rate the complaint mechanism as sufficient or not with regard to the criteria mentioned? [Note: The criteria could be discussed one after the other].

Further information

- The Danish Institute for Human Rights has an interview guide in its '[Human rights impact assessment guidance and toolbox](#)' (in English, available in the 'Practitioner Supplements').
- The Business & Human Rights Helpdesk has made the information package from its third peer-to-peer workshop available: '[Communication as the Key to Success - Stakeholder Engagement](#)' (German only).