

Human Rights in the Corporate Sector: Applicability of the UN Norms in the Context of Sri Lanka

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'Human Rights' is an amorphous and dynamic subject, which addresses issues concerning the rights of each and every individual in the society. States have the primary obligation to protect human rights but the Universal Declaration of Human Rights demands that human rights shall be 'respected, recognised and observed' by 'every organ of society'. The UN has developed a set of "Norms on the Responsibilities of Transnational Corporations and other Business Enterprises with regard to Human Rights", which seek to clarify what adherence to different rights should entail in practice for companies.

This research tends to assess the extent of awareness and concern in the Sri Lankan corporate sector on the need to incorporate promotion and protection of human rights into their business policies relating to Corporate Social Responsibilities (CSR). The study also analyses the preference of the corporate sector and policymakers on whether the set of voluntary guidelines or a compulsory compliance mechanism should be in place for the promotion and protection of human rights in the corporate sector.

In the process of data collection, different business stakeholders were interviewed and a questionnaire was distributed among senior management level employees in the corporate sector to obtain their views and preferences. Additionally, annual reports of selected public companies were also perused. The UN Human Rights Norms for Business was used as the conceptual framework to compare and analyse the existing practices in the Sri Lankan corporate sector and the applicability of the Norms in the context of Sri Lanka. The study found that, though members of the Sri Lankan corporate sector are not very familiar with the recent initiatives of the UN Human Rights Norms for Business, they have realised the importance of ensuring the rights of the community and the employees in their business operations. So that, they have already voluntarily taken many initiatives for the protection of the human rights enumerated in the UN Norms for business sector.

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