

SRSG John Ruggie  
Video Message to VPs Plenary  
Oslo, 16 March 2009

Allow me to welcome all of you virtually, as I was able to do in person at the 2007 plenary. And let me express my hope that none of you will leave this meeting before wrapping up the important but also painful process of trying to retrofit the VPs participation criteria while everyday reality in on the ground in many countries cries out for your attention and action.

I am on a sabbatical leave this year from my teaching duties at Harvard. Thanks to a Guggenheim Fellowship I'm supposed to be writing a book on business and human rights. The VPs chapter remains unwritten.

It is my devout hope that it ends up telling the story of how a diverse group of stakeholders managed to overcome suspicions, their own institutional and political agendas, and a zero-sum approach to resolving differences – all for the greater good. That greater good is the security and human rights of people and communities on the ground in some truly challenging contexts.

It is possible to achieve progress in business and human rights. My own UN mandate attests to that. Starting from the deepest divisions among business, governments, and civil society in 2005, we have achieved a common basis for moving forward. Last June, the Human Rights Council was unanimous in welcoming the “protect, respect, and remedy” framework I proposed.

In a resolution led by Norway that was co-sponsored by 43 countries, the Council extended my mandate for another three years, asking me to “operationalize” the framework – to provide “practical recommendations” and “concrete guidance” to states, businesses and other social actors on implementing the framework.

The VPs address a very important subset of the protect, respect, and remedy framework. The VPs literally can affect life and death issues. I've visited the human rights training center of the once notorious 16th army brigade in Casanare, Colombia, spent time with BP there, and spoke with people in the community. So I know for a fact that the VPs can make a significant positive contribution – if permitted to realize their potential.

I believe two factors in particular will help ensure the VPs success. The first is the need to be as inclusive as possible, accepting some obvious – and objective – red flags.

Let me tell you a Kofi Annan story about inclusivity. At a press conference announcing the Global Compact in June 2000, Annan wanted to share the platform with a leader from each of business, labor, and NGOs. As the business representative, I suggested a very nice and very uncontroversial Dutchman. Annan said no. He wanted Phil Knight, the CEO of Nike. So Knight it was.

One of our more aggressive journalists at the UN jumped up to ask Annan the first question: "Secretary-General," he said, "isn't appearing here with Phil Knight equivalent to supping with the devil?"

Without a moment's hesitation Annan replied: "the angels don't need our help."

Friends, the same goes for the VPs. The angels don't need our help.

Having observed voluntary initiatives closely for many years, I would also offer a second observation. The VPs require a more empowered Secretariat if the effort is to attain and sustain momentum.

It would not be intended to substitute for the plenary of participants, but to make sure that the plenary doesn't continually get bogged down at the level of the lowest and slowest common denominator.

The gold standard among voluntary initiatives, I think, is the Fair Labor Association. It leads the way precisely because its Secretariat is encouraged and even mandated to cast a critical eye on performance and to recommend practical innovations – to stay focused like a laser on the effectiveness and legitimacy of the effort as a whole.

The VPs deserve no less.

In conclusion, thank you, Norway, for hosting these plenary sessions, and for your continued leadership of my own mandate. And best wishes to everyone present. We await with keen interest the message that the meeting was successful.

Cheers.