

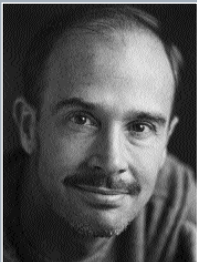
→ CHRIS AVERY

## The difference between CSR and human rights

Companies are making a fundamental mistake and exposing themselves to risk if they do not adopt a human rights framework, argues Christopher Avery, director of the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre.

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Christopher Avery is the founder and director of the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre and an international lawyer. He was formerly legal adviser and deputy head of research for Amnesty International.



### Sometimes the relationship between Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and human rights is not properly understood.

They have very different meanings.

Companies unaware of the difference, or thinking a traditional CSR approach is enough, are exposing themselves to risk.

A CSR approach tends to be top-down: a company decides what issues it wishes to address. Perhaps contributing to community education, healthcare or the arts. Or donating to disaster relief abroad. Or taking steps to encourage staff diversity or reduce pollution. These voluntary initiatives should be welcomed. But a human rights approach is different. It is not top-down, but bottom-up - with the individual at the centre, not the corporation.

Human rights are based on the inherent dignity of every person; they are those basic rights and freedoms to which all humans are entitled. They have been spelled out in internationally agreed standards, including the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. The *Universal Declaration's* preamble calls on "every individual and every organ of society" to promote and respect human rights, which, according to Professor Louis Henkin, a leading international law scholar "excludes no one, no company, no market, no cyberspace". When it comes to human rights, companies do not get to pick and choose from a smorgasbord those issues with which they feel comfortable. The international community has declared all human rights

"universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated".


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Many talk about the 'business case' for CSR. While there is a strong 'business case' for respecting human rights, companies are obliged to respect human rights at all times, not just when it suits them. Irene Khan, Secretary-General of Amnesty International, noted: "Human rights are rooted in law. Respecting and protecting them was never meant to be an optional extra, a matter of choice. It is expected and required. It should be part of the mainstream of any company's strategy, not only seen as part of its corporate social responsibility strategy."

A traditional CSR approach does not protect reputation, because it addresses only certain issues and leaves the company exposed on others. Only a human rights approach provides companies with a framework of globally recognised principles

on which to base their social conduct internationally. The Business Leaders Initiative on Human Rights, now 11 major companies working with Mary Robinson to help mainstream human rights within their operations, recognises that "human rights is the most legitimate and universal framework for determining the social dimensions of business responsibility and issues of corporate governance."

The good news is that some companies, including the members of Business Leaders Initiative on Human Rights, are starting to adopt human rights as the framework for their CSR approach.

Increasingly companies are being judged by their record on human rights. Our Business & Human Rights Resource Centre website tracks reports on the human rights impacts (positive & negative) of over 3100 companies in 160 countries. The site is updated hourly, and receives over 1.5 million hits per month. Users include companies, NGOs, investment firms, procurement officers, consumer organizations and journalists. Our website also provides tools to help those companies looking at their human rights policies and practices. 



For more info:

[www.business-humanrights.org](http://www.business-humanrights.org)  
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