B-Tech & Harvard Roundtable Event Summary

Responsibility in the Anthropocene: Taking stock of the UNGPs role in aligning Technology, Business, and Human Rights and widening the horizon?
(OHCHR B-Tech & Carr-Ryan Center for Human Rights Roundtable)
13 January2026

Introduction

On the 13 January 2025, the B-Tech Team and Harvard Kennedy School Carr-Ryan Center for Human Rights jointly convened a roundtable against a backdrop of accelerating technological change and growing concern over the human rights impacts of digital technologies. The discussion created space to assess the continuing relevance of the UNGPs and how they might be applied in the years ahead.

The roundtable was situated within the broader work of B-Tech, including its AI workstream, which seeks to advance the application of the UNGPs in the AI sector and ensure a rights-based approach. Bringing together perspectives from across policy, civil society and academia, the event offered an opportunity to connect long-standing business and human rights frameworks with emerging debates on AI governance. As the first roundtable of 2026, it set a strong tone for the year and for the direction of B-Tech's AI workstream.

The UNGPs in a Changing Technological and Political Landscape

The session opened with a reflection on the legacy of John Ruggie and the inception of the UNGPs as they mark their fifteenth anniversary. Participants warned that the rapid deployment of AI, combined with insufficient regulation and the growing concentration of market power in the technology sector, risks pushing systems toward a tipping point with harmful consequences. Participants noted the imbalance between the UNGPs' original emphasis on stakeholder engagement and "do no harm," in a technological landscape in which competitive advantage and speed are increasingly rewarded and make it often complex to act solely with a preventative lens. This requires adaptative, on-going human rights due diligence as risks occur and harms materialize, in order to be able to mitigate quickly and efficiently in proportion to the speed and scale of tech adoption.

Consequently, there was broad agreement that the pace of AI development has made traditional approaches to human rights due diligence difficult to apply. Adding to this, participants noted that technology companies and AI systems have increasingly become actors in conflict, underscoring the need for conflict-specific strategies, as existing corporate human rights due diligence frameworks are insufficient to address these risks. Often, regulation was seen as moving too slowly, placing greater need for public pressure

and strategic litigation. The need for clear and concrete moral boundaries that can command broad agreement was also emphasised.

At the same time, there was a strong sense of optimism. Participants stressed the importance of striving for an inclusive society supported by rights-respecting and environmentally sustainable technologies. Achieving this vision was seen as impossible without meaningful private-sector engagement, with B-Tech highlighted as a particularly strong platform for engagement between the private sector and Member States.

From Principles to Practice: Leveraging the BHR Framework

Multi-lateral development banks financing large-scale digital transformation in emerging economies were highlighted as relying on outdated frameworks that inadequately address digital risks, with reputational risk emerging as one of the most effective levers to drive change. While incremental progress in reforming safeguards to adapt better to digital scenarios of human rights harm are ongoing, concerns were raised about the imbalance between, for example, stringent anti-money laundering requirements and comparatively weak human rights protections.

Access to remedy, the UNGPs' third pillar, was identified as being persistently forgotten and especially challenging with digital companies, where black-box AI systems and the limited political will to regulate AI companies hinder accountability. Overall, participants emphasised the need for holistic and faster forms of remedy and broader framing, such as the right to decent work, to build political and public support, while cautioning against relying solely on bottom-line incentives.

Strategy Discussion: Toward a New Agenda

Participants expressed cautious optimism about the progress being made in ensuring the relevance and uptake of the UNGPs in the technology sector, while noting persistent challenges, particularly the continued sensitivity around using explicit "human rights" language. Discussions highlighted parallels between the defence and health sectors and raised fundamental questions about emerging technologies.

There was strong support for articulating a clear vision for the next five to ten years and working to develop strategies grounded in impact-based standards that prioritise human dignity, including protections for cognitive and biological domains. The group noted fragmented advocacy efforts and the need to better harness ideas emerging from youth, alongside the importance of clear terminology and narratives that resonate with technical standard-setters and defence institutions, which must be included in these conversations. Concerns around accessibility, agency, consent, and the right to disconnect were emphasised, as were problematic assumptions underpinning

technology rollouts, data maximisation, and ad-driven business models. Participants also pointed to opportunities, such as using data centres to support renewable ecosystems and local communities. It was suggested that focusing near-term efforts on the most existential risks, including chemical and biological harms, may help build consensus. Learning from past unregulated technology rollouts was urged.

Opportunities for Institutional and/or Strategic Cooperation

In considering future directions, participants stressed the importance of narrative, language, and coalition-building. Fragmentation across advocacy, policy, and academic communities was seen as a key obstacle to progress. At the same time, there was optimism about opportunities to build new alliances, including through education, standard-setting and public procurement.

The roundtable concluded with a shared recognition that the challenges ahead are profound, but that the UNGPs continue to offer an essential reference point for navigating responsibility in the new technological era.

To see more on B-Tech's AI Workstream ***click here***