B-Tech Company Community of Practice: *Stakeholder Engagement Working Group*

2024 Year-End Review

Overview

In 2021, the B-Tech Project launched the tech company Community of Practice (COP), convening representatives of one dozen large tech companies to discuss implementation of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), including various aspects of Human Rights Due Diligence (HRDD), end-use and remedy. By 2024, the group had expanded to participants representing 18 companies, and in addition to monthly informal drop-in sessions, comprised two thematic working groups. Participants selected the groups they preferred to join, one focused on improving effective Stakeholder Engagement, and the other one on Technology and Regulation.

Background

The B-Tech Project COP convened a multi-stakeholder working group in 2022 to discuss the issues around engaging stakeholders in tech companies' due diligence processes. Assembling individuals from industry and civil society, the group met virtually, as well as bilaterally with B-Tech, a number of times throughout the year to identify what they saw as working well in Stakeholder Engagement, which figures in Guiding Principle 18b as "involv[ing] meaningful consultation with potentially affected groups and other relevant stakeholders, as appropriate to the size of the business enterprise and the nature and context of the operation."

The group produced this white paper to dig into what meaningful consultation might look like, and how the views and experiences of relevant stakeholders could ultimately impact the design, development, deployment, and use of digital tech. The objective of the group was to identify ways to enhance stakeholders' role in tech companies' due diligence processes, in order to ultimately develop products and services that are better informed and the paper itself has highlighted five practices for improving this engagement. Subsequent conversations among COP participants have highlighted the potential for the paper's recommendations to spark high-level discussions. These discussions can pave the way for future operationalization. Additionally, the document opens up an important dialogue about the intricate relationship between technology and civil society, offering a valuable opportunity to explore and address these complexities.

2024 Stakeholder Engagement Working Group

At the start of 2024, individuals from the COP self-identified as interested in participating in a Stakeholder Engagement working group, with the primary objective being to continue the exploration of best practices in stakeholder engagement, and to identify real-world examples of these practices that support meaningful, authentic collaboration on both challenges and opportunities, with tech companies and relevant stakeholders.

Over the course of the year, the group - in various iterations depending on company representatives' availability - met five times:

Session 1: April 11 - Organizational session - participants discussed their preferences for the sessions' structure and format. They decided that each session will feature a focused presentation by one or two participants followed by a Q&A, and a group discussion on a particular geography or technology and its impact on potentially affected stakeholders.

Session 2: May 22 - As guest speaker, a representative from the Office of the Danish Tech Ambassador shared insights on best practices for industry and government engagement

Session 3: July 9 - Company-led conversation by representatives of Ericsson, discussing their commitments to stakeholder engagement, detailing their approach to information sharing, timing, length, and shared value. This was followed by a group discussion on the "consultation" requirements outlined by the DSA, exploring how companies can effectively engage with external stakeholders work to meet regulatory obligations and identifying scenarios where such consultations may not be feasible.

Session 4: September 4 - Led by Meta, participants were presented with a realistic, fictitious scenario of a country in crisis to analyze the impacts of social media on the society in conflict. This exercise served as a platform to highlight prioritization and dilemmas arising from conflict dynamics, as well as the potential options available to the company.

Session 5: October 30 - NDI representatives presented their action plan for digital responses to crises, which includes suggestions both for civil society and for industry on how to better prepare to engage with groups externally and work in collaboratives ways before and after a crisis.

The five sessions presented practices of engagement with both internal and external stakeholders, end users, civil society organizations, and UN Member States, demonstrating the complexity in approaching diverse stakeholder groups, and providing examples of how and why company approaches should also not be seen as monolithic. The participating companies described how their investments in developing effective models of stakeholder engagement vary but are all intended to support a thoughtful human rights due diligence process, identifying and mitigating prospective human rights risks and impacts. Most of the tactics undertaken by the companies involved qualitative engagement, working towards the relationship building B-Tech outlined in the 2023 white paper ("relationships over transactions") Additional notable initiatives included Meta's simulation exercise and Ericsson's surveys, along with their articulated commitments to stakeholder engagement as part of their human rights governance. These focused efforts are likely to enhance the companies' understanding of effective stakeholder engagement.

Partnership on AI made an additional presentation on addressing the rights of data enrichment workers; due to scheduling this was conducted at one of the COP's monthly drop-in sessions rather than at a focused Stakeholder Engagement WG.

LOOKING FORWARD

Initially the intention with this iteration of the working group was for the participants to self-organize and offer presentations based on examples of challenging engagements with stakeholders, or notably productive ones. Of the full working group, two participants volunteered to present, and in the absence of other willing volunteers, B-Tech invited external partners from government and civil society to present in subsequent sessions. For 2025, participants in the Stakeholder Engagement working group will again be invited to lead the majority of the presentations; if COP company representatives prefer B-Tech to organize and schedule the working group sessions, it may require additional resources to augment the team's capacity.

Contact

For additional information about the B-Tech Company Community of Practice please write to OHCHR-b-techproject@un.org. For more information about the B-Tech Project, including past and upcoming activities, please visit the B-Tech project portal.