

Summary of the LSE IDEAS x Human Impact Pathway Webinar “Risks and Rewards: the calculus of working in countries affected by conflict and crisis”, 5 November 2025.

Introduction

In a series of two webinars, the [Human Impact Pathway](#) at LSE IDEAS looks at how responsible business can navigate a world increasingly characterised by geopolitical turmoil and conflict. In this first webinar we looked at the principles of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), the UN Guiding Principles on Human Rights and conflict sensitivity for avoiding and mitigating risks. What legal and normative obligations do you as a business have when operating in conflict zones; how should you work with suppliers that have operations in conflict zones? What strategies have companies adopted to manage conflict risks?

Key messages on IHL and human rights

- **Embrace complexity.** Understanding obligations and liabilities under IHL is complex, and it takes time to work with its concepts.
- **Respect both human rights and IHL.** Commitments to human rights are necessary and laudable, but not sufficient. In conflict zones, IHL exists to regulate behaviour including that of armies, armed groups and businesses and as such IHL forms an additional layer to business conduct. IHL applies also to belligerent occupation, such as the Western Shara, West Bank and Gaza, Crimea and the Donbas.
- **Risk factors: IHL opens up the possibility of being accused of supporting war crimes.** Current court cases like Lundin Energy and BNP Paribas related to the conflict in South Sudan, and Lafarge in Syria could lead to many more.
- **IHL also protects businesses as they are civilian organisations.** In dealing with local government and armed groups, IHL provisions govern the relationships between business and other actors.
- **Heightened Human Rights Due Diligence (HHRD)** is needed as more extensive than HRDD, and includes IHL.
- **Use HHRD and a conflict-sensitive approach** to prevent fuelling conflict and human rights abuses. However, translating guidelines to practical tools is not always easy.
- **Example: telecommunications during the Arab Spring.** Companies were forced to shut down internet services while staff were held at gunpoint
- **Core features of HHRD** include
 1. understand the conflict context (triggers of violence, conflict actors, political agendas, on the national and the local level),
 2. integrate HHRD into governance systems to prevent and minimise negative impacts and positively contribute to peacebuilding
 3. engage with stakeholders while taking care not to place them in danger,
 4. apply continuous monitoring as conflict evolves

Lessons from working with conflict-affected communities: Grupo Energía Bogota (GEB)

- **Corporate presence in Colombia covers more than 300 municipalities.** Regions are dealing with poverty, social exclusion, and either organized crime or are affected by conflict (ELN, FARC dissidents). **Many places still characterise as high-risk.**
- **GEB applies conflict-sensitivity and past learnings to all regions** as if there is a presence of armed groups. Staff is prepared to handle restrictions and risks related to extortion, kidnappings, and carries out risk assessments and safety measures before site visits (e.g., satellite phones, geo-location trackers, security escort).
- **Adapt how to engage with communities.** With armed groups present, visits can be unsafe. Meet in urban centres, use digital tools like social media and whatsapp for communications, and work through local leaders when engaging with communities.
- **Growing interest in HHRDD** among companies in Colombia; **IHL is an area of further improvement.**

Additional points from the discussion:

- **IHL and HHRDD are necessary to take decisions about responsible exit.** Investors and companies increasingly need such evaluations where a deep understanding of the operational context of target/portfolio companies is essential.
- **Addressing both business opportunities and peacebuilding is complex but possible,** key is to work with local communities and institutions.
- **Example: “Energy for Peace”**, a programme aimed to advance peacebuilding and promote economic opportunities in territories affected by armed conflict, combining humanitarian demining, community empowerment and local development initiatives together with local communities, the Colombian Army and NGOs. **Understanding the context and needs of different community groups was essential** to build trust and ensure meaningful engagement.
- **To help indigenous communities** communication about the laws that protect them is extremely important. Local communities may have different views compared to global organisations about exits from conflict zones, understanding both global and local views on staying versus exiting is helpful.
- **How to use data effectively?** Considering investment decisions, or operational decisions in companies, accurate local data is important. The Human Impact Pathway uses around 300 indicators of human rights and security, to complement existing assessments on risks in conflict settings. The Human Impact pathway also adds a layer of community consultation. They offer a panorama of what is going on in real-time, and these types of data are what investors need to take decisions.