

# The UN Guiding Principles at 15: Enduring Relevance in a Changing World

This essay is part of [Shift's series](#) marking the 15th anniversary of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

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As the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) mark their 15th anniversary in 2026, it's worth reflecting on the profound shift they have catalyzed.

What was once dismissed as a radical notion – that companies, not just states, bear a responsibility for human rights – is now an established principle. This is in no small part due to the vision of the UNGPs' author, the late Professor John Ruggie.

When John began his UN mandate 20 years ago, the idea that businesses should prioritize human rights beyond mere philanthropy or legal compliance was largely scoffed at.

Most companies operated under the assumption that human rights were the state's domain, and their role was simply to follow local laws. Any engagement with human rights was often reactive, a response to reputational damage from issues like child labor in supply chains or community deaths around mining and oil sites. There was no widespread acceptance that respecting human rights was a responsibility for *all* companies, *everywhere*.

Today, that conversation has fundamentally changed.

The UNGPs have led to a sea change in assumptions and mindsets across the business community and governments alike. For sure, it's lip service for some; but for many it's much more than that.

Companies are increasingly grappling with how to understand, prevent, and remedy impacts on the human rights of workers, communities and consumers that are connected with their business.

The fact that this remains the case even in these challenging times is testimony to the reality that the UNGPs are not just words on paper, or a transient take on the world at one moment in time. They are deeply rooted in an understanding of the systemic change that is needed – now more than ever – and how such change happens.

That understanding came from the long academic career of John Ruggie, a preeminent political scientist, whose scholarship focused on the impact of globalization on international rule making, and whose insights both informed, and were informed by, his experience in senior UN roles.

Two aspects of John's academic work are fundamental to the design of the UNGPs and to their enduring relevance today.

## **The content of the UNGPs: designed to advance fairer systems**

The first of these informed the content of the UNGPs. In a seminal 1982 article that launched the concept of *'embedded liberalism'* for which John became well-known, he examined the lessons from history that markets and the forces of globalization need to be embedded within social norms and institutions if they are not ultimately to fail.

In a speech some 40 years later, he highlighted that business and human rights is all about the “social sustainability of globalization”. It responds to the fact that “the benefits and burdens of globalization have been unequally distributed within and among nations” resulting in “public resentment and a loss of trust in institutions of all kinds”.

The UNGPs therefore speak directly to today’s crisis of economic inequality, to its origins in the continual weakening of constraints on market forces, and to its consequences in the growing polarisation, nationalism, xenophobia and economic protectionism that John (and others) foresaw.

The UNGPs are not just relevant to specific human rights abuses in specific industries at the time they were written; they address the very systems that make such abuses not just possible but inevitable across industries and countries. They articulate the necessary limits on acceptable corporate conduct for societies and markets to be sustainable: that profits should not be made by externalizing costs and risks onto the most vulnerable workers, communities and consumers.

In sum, the UNGPs provide the essential ingredients for bringing business practices and markets back within the bounds of universal social norms of fairness and dignity for all.

As John repeatedly stressed, business needs this too, since “markets that societies do not recognize as legitimate cannot last”.

## **The form of the UNGPs: designed for cumulative and enduring change**

If the growing crisis of inequality informed the content of the UNGPs, John’s study of the ways in which durable international standards and rules evolve shaped their form.

It was through his study of so-called *'polycentric governance'* that John looked at how the interplay between the distinct roles and interests of states, business and civil society generates change in international norms. He was interested in how these dynamics could be used to bring about fairer rules and practices regarding business impacts on people: rules and practices that would be mutually reinforcing and strengthen over time.

The UNGPs are all about the workers, communities and consumers whose human rights can be affected by business. But for people’s voices to have sway in the corporate decisions that affect their lives, the standards had to address the institutions with the power to make the changes we need. So the UNGPs speak directly and deliberately to those organizations – state, business and financial – whose leadership is essential if we are to adapt capitalism and globalization away from their current excesses.

They do so in a way that has been able to gain support and uptake with both governments and the private sector, securing their status as an authoritative global standard. That in turn has given civil society – and the people whose lives are directly impacted – a clear and recognized set of expectations for holding powerful organizations to account, and bringing about further change.

As John summarized it: “[The UNGPs] are not merely a text. They were intended to help generate a new regulatory dynamic, one in which public and private governance systems, corporate as well as civil, each come to add distinct value, compensate for one another’s weaknesses, and play mutually reinforcing roles—out of which a more comprehensive and effective global regime might evolve.”

### **From theory to practice**

The proof is in the pudding, of course. Everyone scrutinizing the UNGPs is, and should be, focused on the change they bring in practice: in the lives of vulnerable workers, communities and consumers and the outcomes they experience.

No law or standard can, on its own, eliminate the harms it seeks to address. But, 15 years on, we should expect to see substantive changes in the business practices that lead to human rights harms, and in the incentives from governments and financial actors that shape such conduct.

And we do.

Governments across all regions have advanced action plans to implement the UNGPs, and provided guidance and incentives to help companies improve practice. Recognizing that voluntary measures are not enough, many are now introducing human rights due diligence and reporting requirements through law and regulation, moving us towards the ‘smart mix’ of measures that the UNGPs call for.

Ever more companies, investors and lenders have moved beyond the foundational steps of developing human rights policies and impact assessments, to more assertive, targeted action to prevent, mitigate and remedy harms. They increasingly engage with workers, communities, trade unions, as well as industry peers and suppliers, to understand the root causes of human rights harms and craft joint solutions.

A growing range of investors is interrogating companies’ human rights due diligence, demanding progress on catalytic issues such as living wages and child labor, and understanding that poor relationships with workers and communities can have real-world costs for companies. And complaints mechanisms as well as legal actions in national and regional courts have increasingly cited the UNGPs in pursuit of remedy for people harmed by business activity.

Throughout this series of articles to mark the UNGPs' anniversary, Shift will be exploring this evolution in practices and outcomes that the UNGPs have helped engender, and what remains to be done.

### **The hardest change of all**

Meanwhile, the greatest barrier to faster progress sits in the very essence of the system that has to change – the market incentives that continually drive business leaders' focus back to short-term returns to shareholders, even when they know it makes no sense for their companies' long-term interests. Here the role of governments acting in the public interest is an essential ingredient for change – in all the ways set out in the UNGPs, but not least in the regulatory developments that must accompany policies, support, advice and other state roles.

The expansion in Europe and elsewhere of mandatory human rights due diligence and reporting is a significant step forward in this regard.

Moreover, it is particularly noteworthy that when political headwinds led to some weakening of the EU due diligence law in 2025, scores of businesses and business groups intervened to argue (publicly and privately) that its core requirements should remain aligned with the UNGPs, and the closely related OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises. They – in parallel with many civil society organizations – underlined the need for due diligence to prioritize the most severe impacts on people, across global value chains.

These voices ultimately prevailed with the political forces in Brussels. And so that dynamic interplay of government, business and civil society roles – polycentric governance in action – kept us moving forwards.

### **Onwards**

Over the years, many observers have commented on what the UNGPs do or don't say, how they are or aren't structured, who they do or don't address. And like any such standard, they deserve scrutiny and reflection. But too often they are read without reference to the insights that informed their design in both their content and form.

The fact is that the deep and strong roots of the UNGPs that lie in an understanding of the deficits in our current-day capitalism and the consequences of globalization, along with a clear grasp of the processes through which durable change can be achieved, are what sustain their relevance and their continuing achievements.

They have already moved us well beyond simply reacting to business and human rights crises to proactively building a more just and sustainable global economy where human rights become an inherent part of how business is done.

The journey continues, but the principles laid down 15 years ago offer a proven and enduring compass for the path ahead.