

Fifteen Years of the UN Guiding Principles: Reflections From a Global Trade Unionist

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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The adoption of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) fifteen years ago significantly strengthened the international framework for protecting workers' rights within and across borders. The UNGPs built on existing legal standards established by the International Labor Organization (ILO) in articulating the corporate responsibility to respect human rights – including labor rights – as an expectation of all businesses, everywhere.

The ILO Conventions, especially the core Conventions underpinning the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, provide the normative foundation for the work of the international trade union movement. They include enabling rights like freedom of association, the right to organize, and collective bargaining. States that ratify the Conventions are obliged to comply with these fundamental labor standards. Non-ratifying states are still expected to support the principles of the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work.

The UNGPs complement the ILO core Conventions by making clear that businesses, not only governments, have an independent responsibility to respect internationally recognized human rights. Companies are expected to determine if they cause, contribute to, or are directly linked to adverse human rights impacts and use their leverage to prevent or mitigate those impacts. That responsibility extends to salient adverse impacts in their business relationships throughout their global value chains.

The Building and Woodworkers' International (BWI) recognizes that the UNGPs have provided a practical framework for corporate responsibility, particularly in major construction and infrastructure projects. Governments, project owners and investors increasingly expect major multinationals involved in such projects to comply with the UNGPs, even in the absence of binding legal obligations. BWI like other global unions also has small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in its sectors. Serious problems with workers' human rights are found in smaller enterprises, such as construction subcontractors. These include precarious work, hidden employment relationships, non-payment of wages, and false self-employed status. That is a crucial reason that the UNGPs do and must apply to all businesses and not just large corporations.

Trade unions are not simply one of many stakeholders businesses need to engage with. By focusing on the internal operations of businesses, the UNGPs help to emphasize the unique role of trade unions: they should no longer be seen primarily as external advocates but rather as essential partners in implementing corporate respect for human rights. Most importantly, trade unions provide the worker voice that helps give practical effect to the UNGPs. Without independent worker representation, the meaningful stakeholder engagement, effective human rights due diligence, and lasting remedies envisioned by the UNGPs become significantly harder to achieve.

From Voluntary CSR to Global Framework Agreements

The UNGPs represented an important departure from prior understandings of corporate social responsibility (CSR). In the past, companies developed their own codes of conduct, which often omitted essential rights such as freedom of association. If not entirely absent, trade union rights were frequently poorly defined.

Too many companies relied on certifications and external audits of human rights to assess the company's adverse impacts and those of suppliers and other business partners. Some companies conducted audits themselves; others commissioned external auditors without any involvement by local trade unions. This practice was widespread despite numerous studies and experiences demonstrating that external audits are not a sufficient tool for human rights due diligence. At best, they can play a limited role, but they have too many shortcomings to be relied upon. These include incentives for assessors to produce favorable reports for those awarding the contracts, which can lead to audit fraud and bribery.

The UNGPs require attention to outcomes for affected workers, prioritization based on the severity and likelihood of impacts, and sustained action where risks cannot be resolved through a one-off intervention. Global unions are uniquely positioned to assist companies in identifying salient human rights risks, given their direct contact with workers and continuous workplace presence. They can identify repeat safety failures, pervasive sexual harassment and systematic interference with freedom of association.

For companies with substantial workforces or complex supply chains, meaningful engagement with global unions is a crucial indicator that their human rights due diligence process is credible. Under the UNGPs, this is not a purely desk-based or a tick-box compliance exercise. Rather, human rights due diligence is an ongoing process that requires meaningful engagement with affected stakeholders or their legitimate representatives, such as trade unions. Global unions are essential participants because they represent workers directly affected by business operations, can help identify subcontractors and other business partners with poor labor practices, can help companies prioritize the most severe labor rights risks, and can also help monitor whether mitigation and remediation measures are effective.

BWI's experience provides one of the strongest practical examples of why continuous worker engagement is more effective than one-off social audits. Global framework agreements between companies and global unions are a form of ongoing human rights due diligence. They create institutionalized dialogue, monitoring, and remediation rather than episodic compliance checks. To date, BWI has signed 24 Global Framework Agreements (GFAs) with major multinational enterprises in the building, construction, wood, and forestry sectors. These include BESIX (Belgium), We Build (Italy), and Vinci (France), which were responsible for constructing World Cup stadia and related infrastructure in Qatar. Through these agreements, companies commit to respect international labor standards in all their global operations.

BWI was among the first global unions to incorporate the UNGPs into its GFAs. While GFAs are not collective agreements, the same logic that applies to those agreements applies at the international as well as the national level. If collective agreements are negotiated for an entire sector, there are often, in addition, enterprise agreements. Both trade unions and management understand that companies are not all the same and that adaptations might be necessary at the level of the enterprise.

GFAs are a crucial complement to human rights due diligence. While all businesses are expected to adhere to the UNGPs, businesses vary in their approach and priorities. If a company is serious about addressing the most salient issues, it will benefit from a strong relationship with a counterpart trade union. Global unions have direct experience with human rights due diligence, including persuading companies to change their business practices, facilitating negotiations between companies and local unions, and linking a company's workers around the world, for example, through trade union alliances or global councils.

BWI's Experience with the FIFA World Cup 2022 in Qatar

The FIFA World Cup (FWC) in Qatar was one of the earliest and most influential tests of the UNGPs. It demonstrated that the UNGPs could serve as a practical framework for improving the lives of workers, especially migrant workers, engaged in large global infrastructure projects.

The first attempts to apply the UNGPs in major sports tournaments were in Russia and Qatar. In 2010, FIFA awarded the 2018 FWC to Russia and the 2022 FWC to Qatar. Both countries had serious human rights challenges, and there was intense global scrutiny of the protection and respect of human rights connected to the tournament. In both countries, BWI was involved in labor rights inspections on the FWC construction sites.

The situation in Russia was mixed. Migrant workers were employed from distant parts of Russia and neighboring countries. We discovered that there were also workers from North Korea. They were impoverished and worked in slave-like conditions.

In 2015, BWI filed a formal complaint against FIFA with the Swiss National Contact Point (NCP) under the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, which integrate the UNGPs' human rights due diligence expectations. The complaint alleged that FIFA failed to conduct human rights due diligence regarding migrant construction workers building FWC facilities in Qatar. The Swiss NCP decided that, because FIFA engages in significant commercial activities, it could be considered a multinational enterprise subject to the Guidelines. That opened the door to applying the OECD Guidelines and UNGPs to the FWC 2022 in Qatar.

FIFA was just beginning to react to the UNGPs at that time. FIFA engaged the late Professor John Ruggie, the author of the UNGPs, to examine the implications of the UNGPs for FIFA's operations. In his 2016 report, "[For the Game, For the World: FIFA and Human Rights](#)," Professor Ruggie recommended that human rights should be considered in all stages of the FWC process from bidding to the tournament itself. Among other implications, that meant that FIFA and its local organizing partners had a responsibility to use their leverage to work to ensure that human rights are respected by contractors and subcontractors working on FWC-related construction. Eventually, FIFA integrated this responsibility into its Sustainability Strategy for the tournament.

To keep up the pressure, BWI initiated a "red card for FIFA" campaign to raise the issues faced by migrant construction workers in Qatar. BWI also engaged in a series of dialogues with Qatar's Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy (SCDL), FIFA's local partner and the authority responsible for organizing the FWC. BWI and SCDL agreed to prioritize the most pressing and salient issue: the health and safety of construction workers. In 2016, BWI signed a Cooperation Agreement with the SCDL that included joint health and safety inspections, decent workers' accommodations, and the setting up of Workers Welfare Forums covering all workers building FWC stadia and related projects.

Between 2017 and 2021, BWI and SCDL conducted 59 joint inspections covering over 30,000 migrant construction workers. These inspections resulted in significant improvements in health and safety, including the implementation of safety measures for working at heights, scaffolding, and harness management, safety education, access to medical facilities and measures to address heat stress. After a year, the cooperation expanded to include monitoring the enforcement of the full SCDL Workers Welfare Standards, particularly for all contractors and subcontractors. This resulted in substantial improvements in the working and living conditions of construction workers. They included wage increases, reimbursement of recruitment fees and reforms to the 'kafala' system (where migrant workers are tied to a single employer). These positive outcomes became the basis for broader labor reforms across the country. BWI then signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Qatar's Ministry of Labor for an information and awareness campaign on labor laws and legal rights, as well as training on health and safety.

BWI's access to the worksites and accommodations was critical to the assessment of risks in, and the development of concrete recommendations to improve, the living and working conditions of migrant construction workers. The SCDL, using its leverage to ensure compliance at all levels of contracting and subcontracting, had a major impact on FWC-related construction. From the multinational construction companies to recruitment agencies to subcontractors, enterprises were monitored and required to comply.

Strengthening Workers' Agency

A significant impact of our cooperation with the SCDL was the formation of 113 Workers Welfare Forums (WWFs), which represented 23,000 workers. BWI collaborated with the SCDL workers' welfare team to conduct free and fair elections for workers' representatives. BWI also provided training to elected representatives on relevant laws and regulations, as well as on how to address worker grievances. It was through the WWFs that workers were able to raise their voices, submit their grievances, and resolve collective cases.

After the FWC 2022, there were doubts about the sustainability of Qatar's labor reforms. Migrant workers lacked the agency to represent themselves. There was an initiative to form migrant workers' associations organized by country of origin and language. Former WWF representatives formed the Community Leaders' Forum, which provides legal assistance and a support mechanism among migrant workers. Later, they were recognized by the Ministry of Labor. BWI has been conducting paralegal training for these worker representatives to help them handle worker complaints.

Recently, the Qatar Government passed Labor Law No. 9 of 2026, requiring all companies employing 100 or more workers to establish Joint Committees as a mechanism for workplace dialogue and address migrant workers' grievances. This has the potential to become a good opportunity for global unions to organize and address workplace grievances. However, this labor reform can only be a meaningful step towards genuine workers' representation if it leads to respect for workers' rights to form trade unions. If the workers who participate in the joint committees are not independent, such committees will strengthen employer dominance rather than worker rights.

Trade unions are the strongest and most independent institutional form of workers' agency, through which workers can obtain an effective remedy. An effective remedy is not only about resolving workplace grievances but also about empowering workers to represent themselves and participate continuously in improving their working conditions without employer control. Under ILO standards, collective bargaining is the principal institutional mechanism

through which workers negotiate terms and conditions of employment on an equal footing with employers. Other forms of representation may complement this process, particularly where they facilitate consultation on workplace issues, but they should never replace or weaken workers' ability to organize independently and bargain collectively.

A Challenging Road Ahead: Democracy is at Stake

One of the most significant challenges facing the UNGPs today is the growing erosion of democracy and the shrinking space for independent trade unions. Around the world, authoritarian governments, populist politics, and restrictions on fundamental freedoms are undermining the very conditions necessary for the UNGPs to function effectively.

Trade unions are increasingly facing legal restrictions, intimidation, surveillance, arbitrary arrests, and violence. In many countries, governments have curtailed freedom of association and collective bargaining under the guise of national security, economic competitiveness, or political stability. When unions are silenced, companies lose one of the most reliable sources of information for identifying salient human rights risks. Human rights due diligence risks becoming a paper exercise rather than a meaningful process grounded in dialogue with those most affected.

The rise of authoritarian politics has also been accompanied by increasing attacks on migrants, minorities, and civil society organizations. These divisions weaken worker solidarity and shift public attention away from corporate accountability. Instead of addressing inequality, exploitation, and poor working conditions, extreme ideologues increasingly portray migrants and vulnerable groups as the source of economic insecurity. Such distortions undermine the universal nature of human rights that the UNGPs seek to protect.

The experience of BWI demonstrates that the UNGPs have been most effective and meaningful when freedom of association exists or where such space can be carefully negotiated, as in Qatar. Trade unions occupy a unique position among a company's stakeholders because of their continuous presence in workplaces and their direct representation of workers affected by business operations. Trade unions are not simply 'another stakeholder' but essential partners in the implementation of corporate human rights due diligence and in achieving lasting remedy.

Fifteen years after their adoption, the UNGPs remain one of the most important international instruments for advancing workers' rights in a globalized economy. Their greatest contribution has been to clarify that human rights are not solely the responsibility of governments but also of businesses at all levels, from local to national to global, and at all points in value chains.

Trade unions need democracy to survive. And democracies need independent trade unions to thrive. The UNGPs draw strength from democratic governance, the rule of law, independent institutions, and the ability of workers and civil society to participate freely. As geopolitical tensions increase and democratic institutions come under greater pressure, strengthening genuine social dialogue and protecting independent trade unions will be essential to ensuring that the UNGPs remain a living framework, capable of delivering real change for workers globally.

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