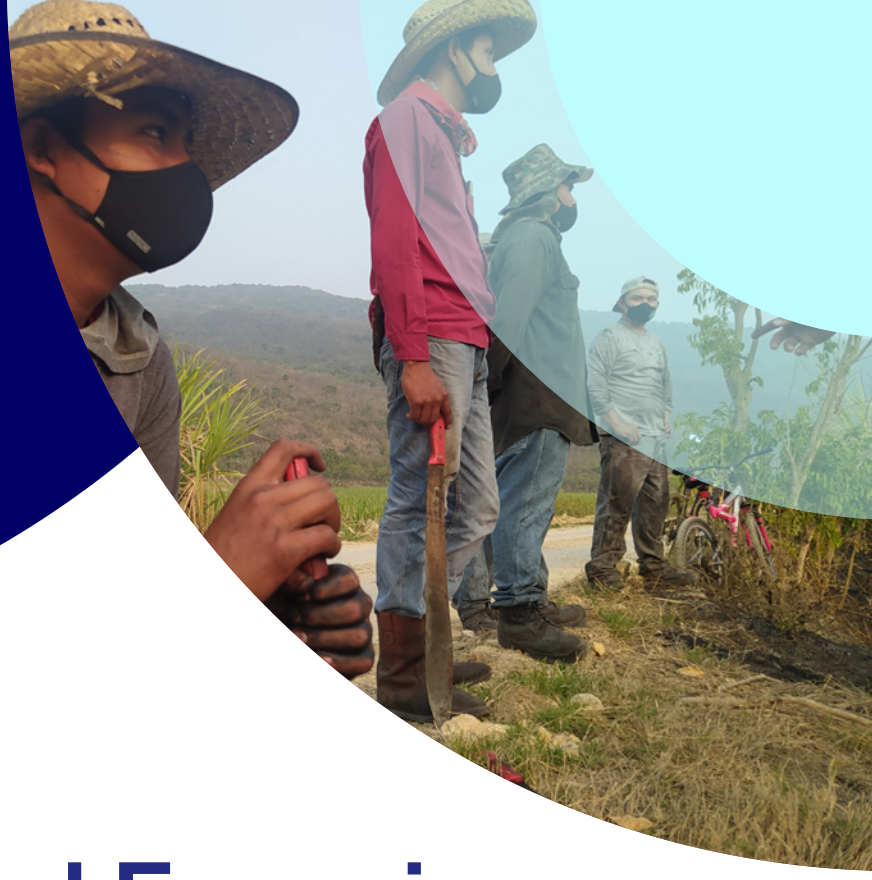


Proforest
Briefing Note 18

November 2025

Respecting and Engaging Human Rights Defenders: Practical actions for agribusiness

Key points

1. Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) play a crucial role in society by raising issues of human rights abuses. They can be valuable partners of companies seeking to mitigate human rights abuses in their own operations and supply chains.
2. Companies should ensure that the rights of HRDs are respected, by taking specific steps that include making a commitment to respect HRDs; reflecting HRDs' rights in Human Rights Due Diligence (HRDD) processes; and providing safe and effective grievance mechanisms.
3. HRDs or their representative organisations should be consulted as key informants when companies create their HRDD systems. Crucially, HRDs must be able to inform the actions companies take to address a grievance in which they are involved. However, given the often-precarious contexts in which HRDs operate, any direct engagement with HRDs must be careful and considered.
4. Companies, especially downstream buyers looking at abuses in their supply chains, can also collaborate to avoid duplication of efforts and take more effective action together.

Who are human rights defenders and how are they affected

Anyone can be a human rights defender. They are people who, individually or with others, act peacefully to promote or protect human rights. HRDs can be acting out of concerns for their own rights, the rights of others, or in response to environmental and climate impacts.

Box 1.

Categories of HRDs at high risk

Labour rights defenders, including trade union leaders, are under increasing pressure. They can experience dismissals, restrictions on organising, physical attacks and judicial harassment.

Indigenous Peoples, environmental and land rights defenders are among those who experience the most violent responses. Around 31% of all HRDs killed in the last decade were Indigenous Peoples.

Women human rights defenders may experience an additional layer of danger in the form of gender-based violence or threats such as sexual harassment, threats of rape, and 'reputational exploitation' and when photos or videos are digitally manipulated to make it look like the woman has done something inappropriate.

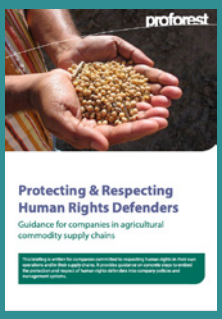
HRDs have a high risk that their rights will be infringed because of their active engagement in protecting human rights or in highlighting human rights abuses. The private sector, government or other organisations may violate the rights of HRDs in an attempt to silence them, to intimidate them into stopping their campaigns, or to send a warning to others who might raise their voices.

Attacks on HRDs working to address the negative environmental and human rights impacts of business are increasing across the globe. Between 2015 and 2024, the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre has tracked more than 6,400 cases of attacks against HRDs, including killings, beatings, threats, strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP), and other attacks intended to silence or intimidate HRDs focused on business-related activities. A majority of these attacks included judicial harassment, including SLAPPs, which is consistent with the global erosion of civic freedoms, including freedom of assembly and right to protest, which are relied upon by HRDs to assert their rights.

According to the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre's database, the countries with the highest record of attacks on HRDs were Brazil, Cambodia, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Philippines, Peru, Russia and the United States.

How companies can take action

Proforest's 2021 publication Protecting & Respecting Human Rights Defenders: Guidance for companies in agricultural commodity supply chains provides more detail on human rights defenders, the abuse they face, and how companies can take action.



This briefing note aims to support companies that are committed to respecting human rights in their own operations and supply chains, particularly those downstream in the supply chain. As global expectations around responsible business conduct continue to rise, many retailers, brands, manufacturers, traders, and refiners are strengthening their efforts to uphold human rights across their operations and supply chains. This momentum is largely driven by emerging regulatory frameworks which mandate environmental and human rights due diligence. Respecting HRDs' rights is not only a legal and ethical imperative but also a strategic advantage bringing tangible business benefits.

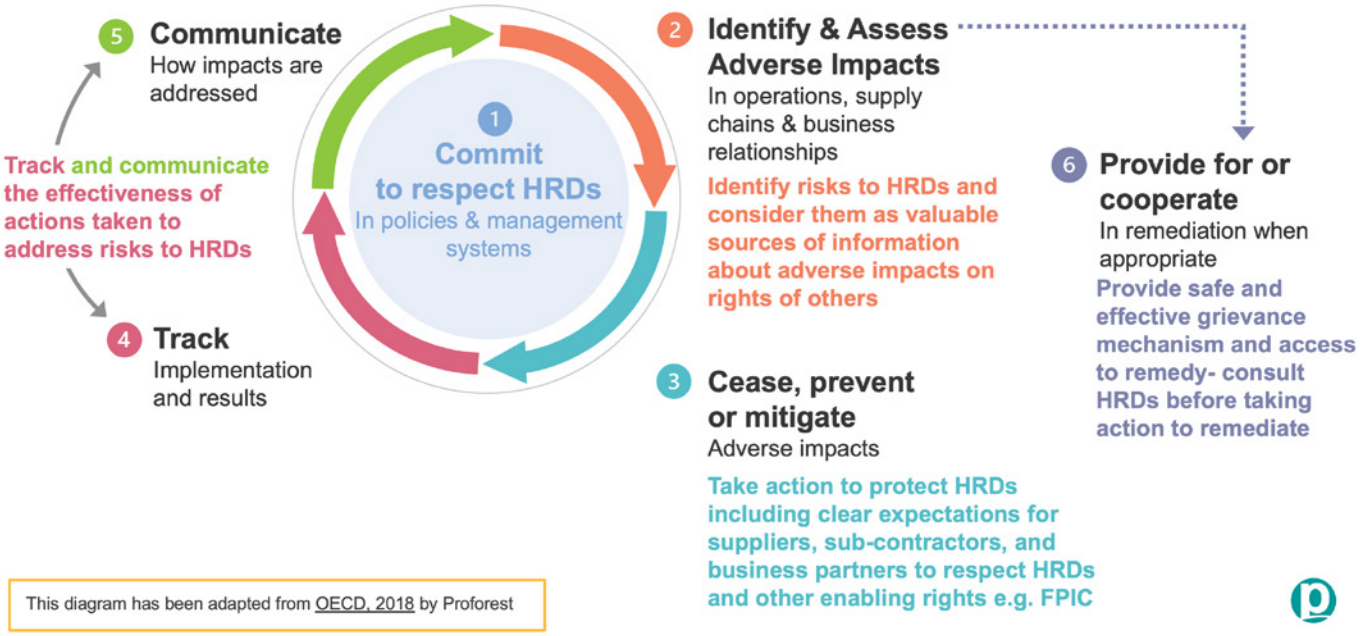


Figure 1: Key actions to embed HRD rights into HRDD

To translate commitments to respect HRDs' rights into meaningful action, companies should take specific, practical steps to integrate considerations of HRDs into their HRDD processes. Figure 1 illustrates considerations for HRDS at each step of the HRDD process, followed by key insights on how companies can practically implement, and benefit from, stronger integration of HRDs into HRDD processes.

Commit to Respect HRDs

Publicly committing to respect the rights of HRDs sends a powerful signal to stakeholders – including investors, suppliers of services and goods, consumers, civil society, and affected communities – that a company is serious about respecting human rights and ultimately about the sustainability and resiliency of its supply chain. Whether integrated into a broader human rights or sustainability policy, or articulated in a stand-alone statement, this commitment enhances corporate credibility and trust among stakeholders.

Making a commitment to respect other enabling rights (see Box 2) is also a powerful mechanism for reducing the drivers of conflict.

Box 2.

Key enabling rights for HRDs

Companies have a responsibility to respond to identified cases involving abuse of HRD rights, but, crucially, also to take action to prevent violations from happening. The following rights and mechanisms are key enablers for HRDs to safely operate. By respecting these rights, companies contribute to an environment supportive of HRDs and reduce drivers of conflict, which also negatively impact the business environment.

- **Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)** is a collective human right of Indigenous Peoples, tribal peoples, and local communities to give and withhold their consent prior to the commencement of any activity that may affect their customary and statutory rights, lands, resources, territories, livelihoods and food security. A process for ensuring companies or their suppliers complete FPIC processes is a foundational step to avoid abuse of HRDs' rights, given the prevalence of attacks in retaliation to their work protecting land, environment, or Indigenous Peoples' rights. (To learn more about FPIC, visit the Proforest Academy Introduction to FPIC.)
- **Freedom of Assembly and Freedom of Association** are relied upon by individuals and groups, including HRDs, throughout the supply chain to safeguard other rights and call attention to violations of rights.

Incorporate respect for HRDs into Human Rights Due Diligence

Incorporating respect for HRDs into HRDD processes delivers critical value for companies seeking to manage risk and build resilient, rights-respecting supply chains (see Proforest Briefing Note 15: Human rights due diligence). As champions for human rights, HRDs contribute to inclusive and just societies and, when their concerns are properly addressed, build the resilience of key sourcing areas for agribusiness. HRDs are not only among the most vulnerable rights holders – often facing heightened threats – but also serve as vital sources of insight into human rights risks affecting broader communities.

For example, by engaging HRDs meaningfully during the impact assessment phase, companies gain early, credible intelligence on potential and actual harms, enabling more accurate risk identification and more effective mitigation strategies. Applying a gender-sensitive lens further enhances the quality of insights, ensuring that the unique experiences of women and sexual and gender minorities defenders are understood and addressed—ultimately contributing to more inclusive and robust due diligence systems. Box 3 shows a case study of WiLDAF Ghana, a women's rights defender network committed to advancing the rights and dignity of women and girls across Ghana.

Embed respect for human rights defenders into supply chain management

By embedding respect for HRDs into supplier engagement, including by setting clear expectations for supplier commitments and actions, companies can reduce the likelihood of causing or contributing to attacks against HRDs. This is especially key for retailers, brands, and other downstream companies, who are often linked through their supply chain relationships. When directly linked to abuse, companies have a responsibility to use their leverage to end the abuse and support remediation. By encouraging direct and indirect suppliers to actively respect the rights of human rights defenders—including through clear non-retaliation commitments and their implementation—companies reduce the risk of harm to defenders in their supply chains. This proactive approach also lowers the likelihood that companies will need to engage in future remediation.

If action by a supplier in response to a grievance is insufficient, disengagement may be the final resort. In such cases, disengagement should be done responsibly, ensuring this does not worsen or create additional human rights abuses. By setting clear expectations with suppliers and working with them to build capacity to respect the rights of HRDs, companies can proactively secure supply chain relationships and reduce the risk they will have to resort to disengagement.

Box 3.

Case Study – WiLDAF Ghana women's rights defender network

A recent collaboration between Proforest and WiLDAF Ghana (a recognised women's rights defender network), highlighted the key role HRDs can play in informing strategies and actions to respect rights in commodity production. A key learning was the importance of building trust and protecting confidentiality in order to successfully partner with HRDs and to design mechanisms for women workers or other marginalised groups to assert their rights.

The project spanned seven cocoa and oil palm cooperatives in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, which are sectors facing persistent human rights risks including unsafe working conditions, forced labour, and child labour. Limited access to rights-based information and weak grievance systems leaves many workers without a safe way to report abuse or seek remedies.

Through the project a mobile tool was deployed to track labour risks while enabling workers and farmers to share concerns anonymously, access information on their rights, and connect to remedies. The partnership with WiLDAF Ghana has enabled a better understanding of the barriers that women face when reporting abuse or seeking remedy to be embedded in the mobile tool and the project more generally.

WiLDAF led focus group discussions to gain a deeper understanding of the complex issues at play and facilitated training and awareness-raising sessions which emphasised the importance of addressing gender-based violence, harassment, and unfair labour practices. Despite initial under-representation, there has been a significant increase in women's participation. Measures were taken to ensure the confidentiality of project partners, including WiLDAF, and programme participants including secure communication channels, anonymity and security of data.

Provide safe and effective grievance mechanisms and access to remedy

When companies have an effective grievance mechanism, aligned with the UNGP effectiveness criteria, HRDs can safely raise complaints without fear of reprisal or risk of escalation of conflict. An effective grievance mechanism can result in issues being raised before severe harm to HRDs is caused.

An indicative process for responding to a grievance involving HRDs in the supply chain is pictured in Figure 2. Given the precarious contexts where HRDs operate and risk of escalating harm, HRDs should be consulted before any remedial action is taken. However, this engagement needs to be cautious and considered and clear safeguarding principles should be in place; initially HRD representative organisations can support an investigation and confirmation that direct engagement with HRDs is safe for them.

Given many companies can be linked to a single case through their supply chain relationships, private sector can collaborate to avoid duplication of efforts when engaging HRDs. Collaboration can also facilitate more effective actions to address grievances, especially for actions beyond the supply chain. This can include, for example, engagement with government or industry bodies, joint public statements, and collaborative programmes to address root drivers of conflict. While private sector collaboration is a valuable approach for addressing grievances in the supply chain, it does not replace each company's obligations to have robust HRDD systems and to drive meaningful remediation within and beyond the supply chain.

Box 4.

Best Practice Note for Business on HRDs

The Human Rights Coalition and Forest Positive Coalition of the Consumer Goods Forum (CGF), partnering with Proforest, have developed the Best Practice Note for Business on Human Rights Defenders, outlining how businesses can respect HRD rights. This includes examples showing how companies can integrate considerations around HRDs into policy commitments and HRDD, and how to respond when a case is identified in the supply chain. Informed by stakeholder engagement as part of the writing process, the Note identifies opportunities for more robust and effective action through collaboration, as well as an understanding of companies' shared responsibility to respect HRD rights.

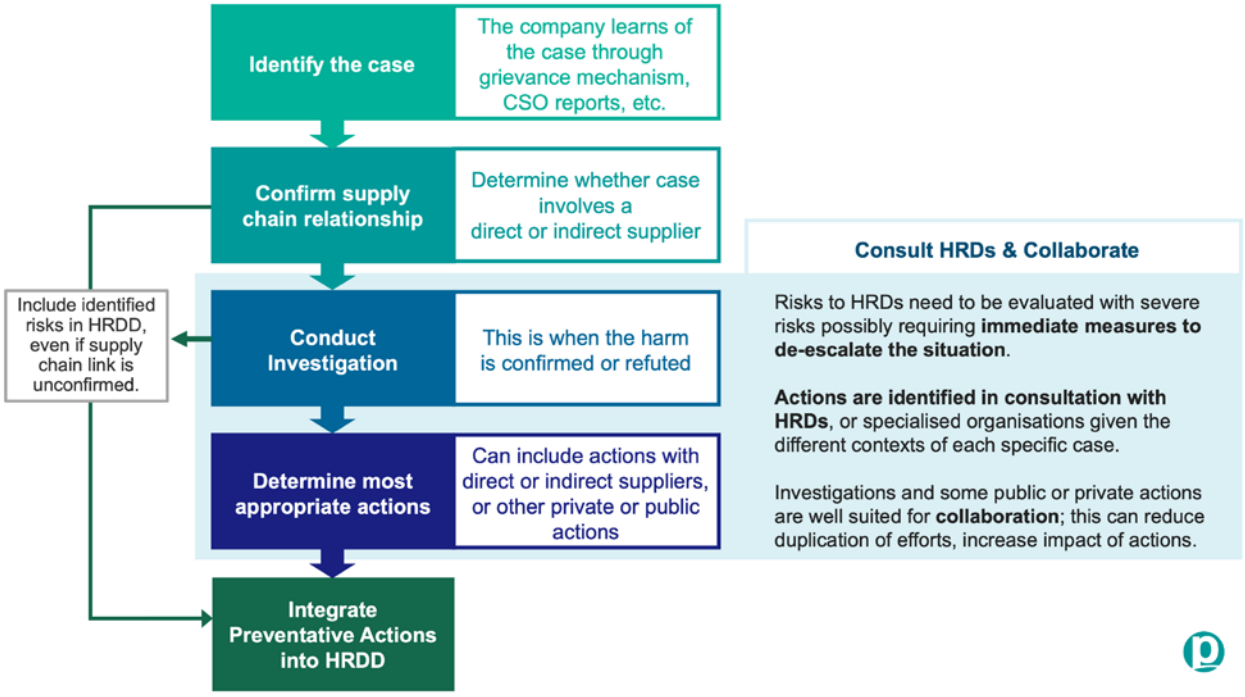


Figure 2: Indicative process for responding to a grievance involving HRDs in the supply chain

Looking ahead

Both legislative and voluntary measures to ensure respect for human rights in supply chains are increasing, some with specific provisions for HRDs or issues commonly affecting HRDs like SLAPPs. At the same time, the foundational civic freedoms which are relied upon by HRDs to assert their rights are under attack globally. Climate change is exacerbating human rights risks in company supply chains, for example, through deteriorating working conditions due to extreme heat and rising forced labour linked to climate-induced migration. It is also increasing conflict over natural resources, particularly land and water. These factors bring both challenges and opportunities for solutions through integrated due diligence, collaborative action, and support for the enabling environment

Implementing Integrated Due Diligence

Climate change is increasing pressure on land, water and labour conditions, prompting more HRDs to speak out, which further exposes them to risk of retaliation and abuse as they advocate for respect of those rights that intersects with commodity production. Their frontline experience makes them key allies in identifying and addressing climate-related human rights risks. As highlighted in the AIM Progress and Proforest Primer, Humanising Net Zero Targets, integrating climate considerations in human and environmental due diligence is essential, not only to mitigate risks that expose HRDs, but also to strengthen supply chain resilience.

Taking Collaborative Action

Strong human rights policy commitments, recognising the important role of HRDs, are becoming more common, as are human rights assessments of agricultural commodity supply chains. However, many companies have yet to move beyond assessments to take proactive measures to respect HRD's rights and support effective grievance resolution.

Downstream companies, in particular, may have limited influence in grievance resolution in their supply chain given their distance, both geographic and operational, from the sourcing areas where conflicts arise. This can limit their leverage over the actions of direct or indirect suppliers, connections with government or other stakeholders who have a role to play in remediation, and trust with rights-holders to open a meaningful dialogue.

While the responsibility to remediate, or to influence remediation when directly linked to the abuse, lies with individual companies, collaboration with peer companies and other actors can help increase leverage and advocacy efforts. A practical example of this is a letter sent by 23 brands and labour rights organisations to the Cambodian Prime Minister voicing concerns of criminalisation of labour leaders. Following this letter, a meeting was held between the groups and government representatives and recommendations were shared for labour reforms, including removing legal restrictions to industrial action. Private sector can also collaborate to take action across a landscape, sourcing area, and at national level to address the root causes of risks to HRDs or the conditions that require HRDs to take action to protect rights in the first place.

Collaborative action can also reduce duplication of efforts in grievance investigation and response. Companies can collaborate with peers to commission a joint review or make the results accessible to others so that more time can be spent formulating and taking action. Working together can also support more effective engagement with HRDs and local communities during the investigation and when consulting HRDs or representatives on actions to support remediation. Collaboration can reduce the burden on defenders and enable more thoughtful and coordinated engagement, especially in sensitive contexts where the risk of retaliation to HRDs is high.

Supporting the Enabling Environment for HRDs

There can be a lack of trust and dialogue between HRDs and agri-commodity companies which is further strained through an increase in companies deploying SLAPPs against HRDs and whistleblowers. Companies can open the door to engagement with HRDs by making clear commitments to non-retaliation and commitments to respect enabling rights like FPIC, Freedom of Association, and Freedom of Assembly. The impacts of these commitments are magnified by requiring them of suppliers, cascading expectations through the supply chain.

Even with trust and willingness, both companies and HRDs often lack the capacity for meaningful engagement. HRDs rarely have safe, structured opportunities to interact with companies, while companies often lack tools to understand and mitigate HRD risks. Building capacity on both sides is essential. Brands can go beyond dialogue by supporting existing trust funds and organisations that provide legal aid, psychosocial services and safe platforms for HRDs. Supporting grassroots and community organisations – often first responders for HRDs – through grants, training and convening spaces ensures support reaches defenders effectively.

Conclusion

The mainstreaming of voluntary and mandatory human rights due diligence means consumer, government and civil society expectations on companies to respect human rights will remain. HRDs are critical allies to help companies build resilient supply chains that respect people's rights.