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Business must take a proactive approach to end child labour in supply chains

Although there is still much to be done, Mondelez's approach in the cocoa sector could provide important lessons on how other businesses can more effectively work to eliminate child and forced labour from their supply chains

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I spent one of the longest nights of my life in 2010 in The Hague as part of a group of representatives from government, business, international organisations and civil society engaged in the tortuous process of negotiating a Roadmap for Achieving the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour by 2016.

The framework for the ending of child labour set out in the roadmap was both comprehensive and eminently sensible. But, I think it's fair to say at the dawn of 2016, the results of that have not been what we hoped for.

There has been some progress in reducing child labour across the world (pdf), though there has been negligible impact on child slavery. The roadmap has simply not been adequately implemented to eliminate the worst forms of child labour.

Until recently, businesses have been substantially absent from this struggle. This was demonstrated quite starkly on 19 January by the blustering denials of a range of industry figures to the reports of child slavery in the cobalt mines of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

To a certain extent this is understandable. Businesses have a specific set of competences which rarely include an understanding of human rights or the politics of poverty in the communities from which they source their commodities.

But this does not mean it is excusable. Businesses have a moral obligation, slowly being transformed into legal requirements - notably in the UK and California - to cast a cold eye on their supply chains, identify where the greatest risks of slavery and child labour are, and develop more robust and effective approaches to dealing with them.

In 2010, it was estimated that 60% of the child labour in the world occurs within agriculture. There is however, a small glimmer of hope in the cocoa sector. Nestlé has been doing some impressive work with the Fair Labor Association. And Mondelez has established Cocoa Life, building on work begun by Cadbury's, which brings together civil society representatives,

Adding myself, with leaders in the business to develop strategies on improving sustainability. These are implemented by both the business itself, some of its suppliers, and by NGO partners including Care and Voluntary Service Overseas.



Among this work are strategies on elimination of child labour and child slavery within Mondelez's cocoa supply chain, with which I have been most closely involved.

The approach we have agreed upon is aimed at proactivity, to identify where problems are and potential solutions. A key element of this approach is the use of credible third-party human rights researchers to provide assessments: in this instance a new consultancy, Embode, established by a respected group of human rights and child protection professionals in Bangkok.

Aimed at developing procedures and projects to help communities end child labour and slavery and to encourage children into school, we are at a relatively early stage in turning recommendations into action by staff, suppliers, and Cocoa Life partners. But already the engagement highlights a point made in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (pdf), that it is business' responsibility to respect human rights, and it is governments' responsibility to protect them. For example, one of the reasons there is so much child labour in the agricultural sector of west Africa is because of the shortage of decent schools, something which the roadmap also recognises as a responsibility of government.

So the process of ensuring human rights standards in supply chains should not be regarded as one that is solely a responsibility of businesses enacting some new managerial or contractual procedure in their supply chains. It should rather be regarded as a process involving government, business, trades unions and NGOs working together to fulfil their respective and common responsibilities. A significant part of this will be highlighting to governments the human rights as well as the economic implications of their policies. Here businesses must recognise that they may have to carry a disproportionate burden of this conversation as, in the contemporary world, the voice of business seems to carry more weight with politicians than the voice of conscience.

While there remains much to be done, the approaches being introduced by Mondelez provide, I think, the potential for more constructive engagement by similar businesses in the challenges associated with ending human rights abuses, in particular child labour and slavery, in international supply chains.

And perhaps if a few more major businesses adopt similar approaches then the sort of progress on the elimination of child labour that the roadmap envisioned in 2010 may actually come to pass.

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