CFP: The Corporate Responsibility to Respect Human Rights in Africa

By:

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EthicsLab 1st Anniversary

International Conference

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The Corporate Responsibility to Respect Human Rights in Africa

The discourse on corporate accountability for human rights violations has been shaped to a great extent by the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), resulting from the work of John Ruggie, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Business and Human Rights. The UNGPs were endorsed by the UN Human Rights Council in June 2011 and rest on three pillars: the State duty to *protect* against human rights violations; the corporate responsibility to *respect* human rights in their operations; and greater access by victims to effective *remedy*, both judicial and non-judicial, for human rights violations.

The focus of this conference is the second pillar i.e. the corporate responsibility

to *respect* human rights. While this pillar is increasingly scrutinized, it is mostly done in Western academic contexts. An African perspective on what this second pillar means and entails is lacking despite the continent being the breeding ground for many human rights atrocities attributed to corporations. This conference engages with African intellectual traditions, experiences and expectations, and explores the potential of such African contribution to the business and human rights debate. In this respect, we expect to explore at least four avenues:

1) **Foundations:** What are the foundations of a corporate responsibility to respect human rights? We expect to debate the notion of respect itself, how non-Western and particularly African conceptions of respect may help develop a 'beyond do no harm' approach to respect, and what such approach means for the realization of socio-economic rights in Africa.

2) **Policy:** What are the advantages and drawbacks of human rights due diligence as an instrument or proxy for the corporate responsibility to respect? Our focus here will be on how the specific conflict and poor-resource-setting context of Africa may help shape policies, both at the business and state levels.

3) **Law**: What are the implications of mandating respect for human rights in both domestic and international law, and how doing so help transcend the current weaknesses of the domestic legal framework of many African countries? Given the fragility of political institutions in many African states and the absence of a legal framework regarding business and human rights, we question the instrumentality of building a more robust legal framework beyond the soft law approach advocated by Ruggie in the UNGPs.

4) **Ethics**: What should managers and corporate executive do in the absence of Law and Policy? Our focus here will be to address the specific ethical obligations of local and multinational corporate executives and what is reasonable to expect from them when the regulatory pattern is lacking or very weak.

We call for proposals in any discipline that may help address these areas. Submission of proposals and abstracts (250 words maximum), in French or English, should be sent to Thierry Ngosso, Senior Research Fellow, Institute for Business Ethics, University of St.Gallen & Lecturer of Philosophy & Director of EthicsLab, UCAC (thierry.ngosso@unisg.ch); Florian Wettstein, Professor and Chair of Business Ethics, and Director of the Institute for Business Ethics, University of St. Gallen (florian.wettstein@unisg.ch) and Nien-hê Hsieh, Professor of Business Administration, Harvard Business School (nhsieh@hbs.edu) by **September 30th, 2019**. Selected proposals will be known by October 15th, and we expect full papers by January 31st, 2020. African-based scholars are particularly encouraged to apply. The conference organisers plan to award five conference grants to select African-based scholars, covering 3 days accommodation and a return flight to Yaoundé.

We are happy to count as confirmed keynote speakers:

Danwood Chirwa, University of Cape-Town, South Africa

Flaviana Charles, Business and Human Rights Tanzania, Tanzania

Jean Didier Boukoungou, Catholic University of Central Africa, Cameroon

Viviane Ondoa Biwole, University of Yaoundé II, Cameroon

This conference, which marks EthicsLab's first anniversary, is co-organized by the Yaoundé Ethics and Public Policy Laboratory (Catholic University of Central Africa, Cameroon) and the Competence Center for African Research of the Institute for Business Ethics (University of St. Gallen, Switzerland).

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