



Private sector leadership in human rights-aligned standard-setting:
Advancing multi-stakeholder engagement and human rights commitments
in standard setting processes

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On 8 July 2025, alongside the WSIS+20 High-Level Event and AI for Good Action Summit, the OHCHR and the Global Network Initiative (GNI) co-convened in Geneva and online a diverse group of stakeholders from civil society, the private sector, standard-setting organizations, governments, and academia to explore how human rights can be meaningfully integrated into the development, implementation, and governance of technical standards. Under the Chatham House Rule, the workshop particularly aimed to discuss how the private sector can advance human rights in the development and implementation of technical standards, fostering a human rights-based approach and promoting the uptake of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs). Building on OHCHR's report to the Human Rights Council (A/HRC/53/42) and the wider [B-Tech Project](#), the session highlighted concrete strategies for institutional change and stakeholder cooperation.

Private sector leadership in calling for rights respecting standards is essential for achieving robust technical standards and the UNGPs provide a framework in defining roles and responsibilities of States and companies. With regards to the State Duty to Protect human rights, within the AI governance debate, standards are where the rubber meets the road: they assist in operationalizing high-level policy debates into concrete technical operability. Concerning the corporate responsibility to respect human rights, technical standards act as a vital bridge to break down the abstraction level from policy debates to concrete standards inside companies, defining how to make products safe, rights-respecting, interoperable and well-functioning from a technical perspective.

Defining the Landscape: Participation, Power, and Process

Participants acknowledged that while many standard-setting organizations (SDOs) are “open” for participation on human rights issues in principle, real barriers to access persist in practice: The culture, complexity, and cost (staff time and resources) of participating in international bodies like the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) disproportionately exclude civil society, small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs), and actors from the Global Majority countries. A recurrent theme was that openness alone is insufficient; standard-setting must actively lower practical entry barriers through outreach, funding, and flexible modalities of engagement (e.g. hybrid attendance options). A standards body participant emphasized that it is not enough for SDOs to say, “we are open, come to us” without actively reaching out to human rights and other subject matter experts who are not yet engaged, but that ought to be included in relevant processes. A participant from

a standards body in the Global Majority countries emphasized that public standards and public processes are needed to facilitate meaningful inclusion.

One speaker emphasized that the participatory structure of some SDOs (e.g., individual-based participation at IETF) differs fundamentally from others (e.g., government-led processes at ITU), and this affects who has influence on decision-making and how stakeholders can participate. Another added that formal recognition and equality in participation often masks deeper inequities in power and expertise between stakeholders engaging in these bodies. For example, dominant technology companies can significantly impact the viability of a standard if they refuse to implement it. These are challenging dynamics to address, but deeply influence engagement and the ultimate outcome in standards bodies.

Importantly, the notion that standards are neutral was challenged. Recognizing the inherently political nature of standards—how they shape what technologies can and cannot do—was described as a gateway to embedding human rights more fully in technical processes. Standards do not merely codify interoperability; they mediate fundamental rights such as privacy, non-discrimination, and freedom of expression. Similarly, taxonomy considerations on the standards side include when nuance is needed to talk about interoperability versus performance standards, because most interoperability standards are built in a way that things are built on top of them, resulting in the lack of centrality of other goals like fulfilling and protecting human rights. Some suggested that a human rights-based taxonomy would be helpful for engineers to better understand the considerations civil society and bodies like the OHCHR are proposing.

Making the Case: What are the Business Incentives

Participants also shared company perspectives on what motivates them to advocate for rights-respecting standards. For instance, technical standards can mean clarity about expected conduct for business, such as assisting in compliance with emerging regulatory approaches and supporting in ensuring the legality of corporate processes (open, inclusive, predictable, sustainable). Participants mentioned business incentives for human rights-respecting technical standard setting engagement that fall into the following broad areas: 1) interoperability, 2) regulatory compliance, 3) supports human rights risk management, 4) level playing field amongst all companies (and that they are all evaluated consistently), 5) building stakeholder trust because of the way companies have developed and implemented standards in a rights-respecting manner, 6) reputational risk, 7) litigation exposure, and 8) competitive differentiation.

A respondent elaborated that companies facing public backlash, scrutiny, legal and reputational risks can be motivated to proactively advocate for human rights-respecting standards. Human rights considerations in standards processes can help identify technical blindspots early on. Certification also is an important motivator for businesses. One case study highlighted how internal checklists, due diligence and impact assessments based on national human rights guidance helped a company both align its practices and improve product design. A respondent mentioned the [Human Rights Impact Assessment Tool for artificial intelligence](#) from the National Human Rights Commission of Korea as a useful reference. Another described how embedding human rights into company training, governance, and cross-unit engagement was essential for translating values into action across technical teams. Others mentioned that some companies have internal courses on topics like values and ethics, for technical teams for instance.

While it was acknowledged that some larger companies already have the resources to internally make the case for a human rights-based approach to standards development, it was noted that are still many for them to integrate it, and even greater challenges for smaller businesses. Supporting SMEs through capacity building, partnerships, and integration of human rights into accelerator programs was proposed as an urgent next step. Further engagement between civil society, academia, and international bodies working on human rights, with the private sector is needed to draw out the ways intra-corporate synergies between human rights and standards teams could support substantive advancement of human rights considerations in standards setting. In all cases, it will be critical to build a trusted ecosystem, including within business ecosystems.

Strategies for Embedding Human Rights

Participants emphasized the need for institutionalized checkpoints within SDOs where human rights considerations could be raised—before and during the whole standards development lifecycle. Several organizations shared progress on internal mechanisms for identifying when a standard may have human rights implications and initiating external consultation or expert review. Efforts to codify ethical frameworks were presented and prove promising as models for opening the door for more broader human rights considerations:

- The IEEE’s pre-standard ["ethically aligned design"](#) initiative and its P7000 series of standards, aim to embed human rights into the standardization process. Participants shared that the IEEE’s work on the ["ethically aligned design"](#) initiative influenced its [P7000 series](#) of standards for Addressing Ethical Concerns during System Design. Currently, there is an ongoing process to review the "ethically aligned design" and currently [its second version is available for public discussion](#).
- ETSI published the [ETSI values](#), with specific reference to human rights, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, and UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities. Participants shared that ETSI Board Members are currently holding the project “Human Rights and ETSI Standardization”, which aims to embed human rights into the ETSI standardization process.
- W3C’s organization-wide review could incorporate human rights more into standards work across the organization. W3C has recently published three consensus Statements relevant to Human Rights: [Ethical web principles](#) - which sets high level principles in place for technical development of standards and recognizes human rights international law as a core element; [W3C vision](#), and [W3C privacy principles](#).
- ITU is working with OHCHR and other partners promoting events on standards and human rights. ITU-T approved in the last WTSA some resolutions mentioning human rights. ITU Academy is working on [human rights training to the digital age](#). The TSAG, from ITU-T, approved the EU Contribution on [\[19\] Human rights and technical standardization](#).
- The Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity (C2PA) was heralded as another example of a human rights-based approach to standard-setting, in which civil society participants have created a dedicated group on threats to human rights as part of the standardization process, the Threats and Harms Task Force.

- Participants also mentioned the ISO’s Climate Commitment, known as the [ISO London Declaration](#), as a concrete example of how sustainability was turbocharged in the standards sector, bringing concrete commitments to climate action and net-zero goals.

There was consensus that more inter-community collaboration is needed—between engineers and human rights experts within companies themselves as well as within technical standard setting processes, and across sectors. Dedicated task forces, institutional partnerships, and cross-functional training were recommended to address persistent gaps in language, assumptions, and incentives. Another participant suggested that having dedicated institutional partnerships can help drive incentives and guide standards bodies towards documents that are proactively in support of human rights, along with participation and engagement to make that successful. One example of this kind of partnership is the joint project between the [IEEE and the Council of Europe on the impacts on human rights, rule of law and democracy of the metaverse](#). Participants recalled that technical standards could set metrics for success and risk evaluation. A participant emphasized that on substance, there is a need to develop [gender-responsive standards](#). Another participant referred to [standards and guidance to regulatory convergence for products using AI](#).

Additionally, several attendees called for improved public access to standards documents and greater transparency about the processes behind standard-setting. Without access to draft standards or meeting records, CSOs and communities affected by emerging technologies are unable to contribute meaningfully or hold decision-makers accountable.

Looking Ahead: Rebalancing and Reframing

Throughout the discussion, speakers urged a shift in how standards are framed—not as apolitical technical artifacts, but as governance instruments that can at times reinforce or mitigate harm. The integration of human rights into standard-setting are also connected to a broader discourse around design justice and democratic legitimacy. It is important to consider both top-down and bottom-up approaches, where law is sometimes top-down. The Freedom Online Coalition [Joint Statements on Technical Standards and Human Rights in the Context of Digital Technologies](#) and on [AI and Human Rights](#) are good references for how states can align their standards and human rights strategies. One respondent suggested there should also be alignment between regional and international standards bodies and their approaches to human rights. A question that still needs to be addressed as to whether human rights considerations slow down standardization and whether that is necessarily negative. Participants stated that beyond human rights, an economic, social, and cultural rights focus is needed in standards bodies as well.

This framing resonated especially in debates about institutional reform. There was recognition that while technical standardization plays a complementary role to law and regulation, it must not undermine human rights or serve as a backdoor for circumventing legal obligations. Indeed, some jurisdictions now require that products meet human rights standards and the businesses and Member States to perform human rights due diligence before entering the market.

In closing, participants encouraged OHCHR and its partners to continue convening diverse actors across regions and technical disciplines, and to facilitate the co-development of practical guidance for embedding human rights into both the content and governance of standards. Concrete next steps included exploring the feasibility of integrating human rights considerations

into review processes across SDOs, establishing collaborative models to support SME engagement, and increasing multilateral coordination on rights-aligned standardization. An overarching takeaway is related to the conversations *not* had during the consultation: the consultative framing question that was left open, namely how to foster cooperation between human rights and tech standards teams in companies?