

Parliamentary Question - Oireachtas

To ask the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he will report on the recent NGO Forum on Human Rights which his Department hosted and the way his Department will assist in implementing the UN's Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights; and if he will make a statement on the matter. - Seán Kyne.

Answered on Wednesday, 26th November, 2014.

Answer delivered by Mr. Charles Flanagan T.D., Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade

The DFAT NGO Forum on Human Rights which took place in Dublin Castle on 07 November 2014 focused on the theme of “Business and Human Rights” including how Ireland will go about implementing the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

The Forum provided an opportunity for business, NGOs, trade unions and academics to exchange views on best practices in relation to Business and Human Rights and in particular with a view to informing the process of development and the content of a Plan to implement the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

In my opening remarks to the Forum I noted that

- The development of a national plan is valuable opportunity to situate Ireland as a progressive leader on the issue of business and human rights.

- The National Plan will build on the achievements of Ireland's National Plan on Corporate Social Responsibility which was published by my colleague Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation earlier this year.
- It is important for Ireland's standing internationally and the reputation of Irish companies that we signal our commitment to placing human rights firmly on the business agenda.
- the Plan will aim to assist Irish companies in meeting human rights standards in today's fiercely competitive business environment.
- My Department is eager to facilitate knowledge-sharing and debate between the different sectors and to promote transparency and understanding of how different groups have engaged with business and human rights issues.

I was delighted that representatives from Google, Marks & Spencer and CRH addressed the forum, as well as Emily Logan, Chief Commissioner of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, the new Data Commissioner Helen Dixon, and representatives from the American Chamber of Commerce, Amnesty International, Trócaire and the United Nations and others.

Approximately 200 people registered for the Forum.

The Panel discussions covered topics including "The Business case for Human Rights", "The UN Protect, Respect, Remedy Framework", "Preparation of National Plans", and "sectoral and developing country experiences of business and human rights".

After short presentations from speakers in the panels, the floor was open for what in most cases was a lively and stimulating debate.

The next step will be for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to take forward the process of drawing up the national plan for the implementation of the UN Guiding Principles.

The Forum marked the start of the consultation process which will be continued into 2015. I would encourage anyone who wishes to share their views as to the content of the Plan to make them known to the Human Rights Unit of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade by emailing businesshr@dfa.ie

It is envisaged that the Plan will consist of a reference framework for state actors, business enterprises, and civil society to address the challenges associated with business impact on human rights standards and how to help integrate human rights into corporate culture.

The Plan will provide information on existing policies in place and describe future steps that the Irish government plans to take to implement the UNGPs.