

# Corporate Social Responsibility & Religious Freedom

Among the most common human rights instruments referred to is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 18 states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.<sup>1</sup>

The economic power corporations exert within communities and on governments can serve as a strong impetus for change where human rights are being denied or are not fully protected. In particular, businesses can become influential catalysts for change in protecting and fostering religious freedom on a global basis, and it is in their economic interest to become so engaged. Greater thought is needed regarding how corporate influence could contribute to strengthening the implementation of religious freedom norms. Given the priority often given to commercial issues in foreign policy, corporate social responsibility with respect to the human right to freedom of religion or belief should not be overlooked as an implementation lever.

A reality that is insufficiently understood and thus often overlooked is that businesses that promote religious freedom will benefit from more productive employees, better community environments, and increased goodwill. With globalization, employees come from increasingly diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. An open and respectful environment influences “a person’s potential and actual contribution to a productions process” and allows the employer to address employee concerns more efficiently.<sup>2</sup>

Business stands to benefit from supporting the right of religious freedom through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs. The promotion of religious freedom facilitates other beneficial conditions in society:<sup>3</sup>

1. Improved Human and Social Development—religion improves a community’s access to healthcare, education, and facilitates greater economic equality. A healthy, well-educated populace results in a more efficient workforce. Economic equality reduces societal pressures that may result in riots or other conflicts.

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<sup>1</sup> Universal Declaration on Human Rights, art. 18, G.A. Res. 217A, at 74, U.N. GAOR, 3d Sess., 1st plen. mtg. U.N. Doc. A/810 (Dec. 10, 1948) [hereinafter UDHR].

<sup>2</sup> Douglas A. Hicks; *Religion and the Workplace: Pluralism, Spirituality, Leadership*; 40 (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> The relationship between religious freedoms and other freedoms is so close that they have been referred to as a “commodity of goods.” Brian Grim, *Religious Freedom and Social Well-Being: A critical appraisal*, 2 INT’L J. RELIGIOUS FREEDOM 1, 40 (2009).

2. Reduced Corruption—religious freedom reduces corruption. Corruption steals from a business's bottom line, weakens competitive markets, and erodes the moral fabric of society.
3. Stronger Democratic Institutions—religious freedom strengthens legal, judicial, and other democratic institutions. Strong democratic institutions provide order to society and protect property rights.
4. Fewer Conflicts and Wars—religious freedom reduces conflict and war. Violence can bring a community to a standstill, threaten investment, and impair markets.
5. Economic Growth—religious freedom facilitates economic expansion, which allows communities to grow and provides businesses with opportunity to improve profitability.
6. Favorable Employment Environment—religious freedom creates a better employment environment. Healthy, happy, and well educated employees are more productive and generate better results for businesses.
7. Improve Business Results—religious freedom allows business to demonstrate that they are responsive to human rights issues, engaging stakeholder expectations and promoting relationships with ethically sensitive customers, business partners, and investment funds.

Within the organization itself, employees will be happier and more productive than they otherwise would be. More of the businesses' employees will be willing to work in foreign countries if they can practice their faith there. Additionally, a workplace that is not plagued with religious intolerance will enjoy increased employee morale, communication and collaboration. There will be fewer labor claims related to religious discrimination and increased employee loyalty to the company. All of these factors directly impact productivity, thus the "bottom line" of a business.

The economic power corporations exert in communities and governments can serve as a strong impetus for change where religious freedom is being denied or is not fully protected. Businesses can become one the most influential catalysts for change in protecting and fostering religious freedom on a global basis, and it is in their economic interest to become so engaged.