

The Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights: Backgrounder on Company Implementation

Established in 2000, the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights (VPs) Initiative is a multi-stakeholder initiative involving governments, companies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that promotes implementation of a set of Principles that guide companies in the industries of extracting, harvesting, or developing natural resources or energy on providing security for their operations in a manner that respects human rights.

Through the VPs Initiative, companies are better able to align their corporate policies, procedures, and internal assessments with internationally recognized human rights principles in the provision of security for their operations. In so doing, companies communicate to employees, contractors, shareholders, and consumers their commitment to the Principles: (1) through sharing of best practices and lessons learned with one another, and (2) by collaborating on difficult issues.

(1) Sharing of Best Practices and Lessons Learned Strengthens Internal Policies and Procedures

- **Prioritizing resources by determining risk.** The VPs Initiative helps companies develop human rights risk assessment policies and procedures that better anticipate situations in which human rights abuses are most likely to occur, and translate the results of such assessments into on-the-ground strategies to mitigate human rights risk. One VPs company noted that “implementing the [VPs] ha[s] resulted in significant improvements in the performance of our security personnel at our sites, improved our relationships with local communities and governments and, not least, significantly reduced the risk of security and human rights incidents.”
- **Developing risk mitigation strategies.** The VPs Initiative provides a forum for companies to collaborate and learn from one another when developing internal policies and procedures to minimize the likelihood of human rights harm. For example, companies learn from one another about measures implemented to minimize the risk of abuse of firearms. One VPs mining company minimizes the likelihood of the inappropriate use of force by not allowing security forces to carry firearms unless a risk assessment first determines their use would be justified. Similarly, a VPs oil company only uses armed guards after a review and senior level authorization, which must be periodically renewed.
- **Adopting assessment processes to measure and improve progress.** VPs companies regularly review their internal VPs policies and procedures as they strive to constantly improve their practices. Many companies have internal processes for assessing their implementation of the Principles, and some also commission external assessments. Participants then develop procedures to implement recommendations arising from the assessments. One VPs mining company, for example, uses a checklist of VPs-related indicators as part of its internal assessment process; the company reports that the checklist has helped it to mitigate human rights risk. Another VPs company uses the risk assessment process to categorize operations as high, medium, or low-risk. All high-risk and medium-risk operations are annually or semi-annually assessed by independent external specialists. Other VPs companies have deployed independent investigators in specific instances to ensure implementation of their VPs commitments.

(2) Multi-stakeholder Collaborative Problem Solving Helps Participants Reduce the Risk of Human Rights Violations

VPs Initiative Participants take part in shared learning and joint problem-solving, combining resources to develop best practices around security and human rights challenges. NGO Participants bring to the table their expertise from working with local communities on extractive industry-related issues, which can help companies improve how they interface with communities. NGOs can help companies define and understand the risks they face in working in a particular country, develop plans for mitigating those risks, conduct outreach to local communities, and assess compliance with the VPs. Companies also work with NGOs to understand how they can better interface with communities.

The multi-stakeholder approach also promotes dialogue and collaborative problem solving between governments and companies.

- **Peru.** In Peru, VPs Participants share successful approaches and challenges in promoting and implementing the Principles through an in-country working group, which consists of international and national non-profits, the Peruvian Ministry of External Affairs, embassies of VPs governments, and VPs companies. Through this process, VPs Participants have developed a solid foundation to address security and human rights concerns and to encourage the Government of Peru to join the VPs Initiative.
- **Colombia.** In Colombia, where both the national government and many extractives companies have committed to the VPs, companies report that joining the VPs Initiative has helped them become more accustomed to analyzing, discussing, and addressing human rights issues within the context of every-day business operations. The Government of Colombia regularly engages with company Participants to develop strategies to reduce human rights risks and facilitate sustained growth. Drawing on results from companies' own risk analyses, the Government is adapting its new security model so that the armed forces and the police are better equipped to act in accordance with human right principles. The Government is also preparing a guide for current operators and potential investors that will provide political, social, institutional, and economic context and tools to mitigate the risks of operating and to achieve sustainable development in the country. The Colombian Ministry of Defense and several VPs companies have signed memoranda of understanding that incorporate the Principles as the standard of conduct for the Colombian forces protecting company projects.

For specific examples of Voluntary Principles implementation in particular countries or sectors, please contact the Voluntary Principles Secretariat at voluntaryprinciples@foleyhoag.com.