

## Technology, business and human rights: How to engage with the private sector

### Background

Upholding human rights is a duty of states and a responsibility for businesses. The [UN Guiding Principles of Business and Human Rights](#) (UNGPs) provide the authoritative framework for states and companies, including a clear responsibility of businesses both to address human rights and to avoid causing adverse impacts on human rights through their activities and operations.

In line with the UNGPs, a key obligation of companies is to carry out human rights due diligence on their activities, services, and products, and in their business relationships, to identify, prevent, mitigate and account for how they address actual and potential adverse human rights impacts. Such human rights due diligence should be ongoing, as indicated in the UNGPs: *“recognizing that the human rights risks may change over time as the business enterprise’s operations and operating context evolve.”* In this regard, technological change plays a significant role in determining the business environment.

New digital technologies have an important impact on the way business activities are carried out. Technologies such as social networks, automation, artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things may create social, cultural and economic value. However, the same technologies can also lead to new or aggravated human rights abuses. By transforming the ways in which businesses operate, including those businesses that host new ways of social interaction, digital technologies call into question the role and responsibility of companies in protecting human rights.

The thematic focus on technology and business and human rights will serve to discuss the responsibility of businesses to prevent and address human rights abuses created or facilitated by new digital technologies, and the respective roles of the state as a duty bearer, and of civil society as rights-holders.

### Objectives

1. Discuss the respective roles and responsibilities of different actors (private sector, public sector and civil society) in preventing and addressing human rights harms caused by digital technologies.
2. Explore ways to ensure everyone plays their role, and to enhance engagement between those actors, sharing experiences.
3. Raise awareness of the challenges and responsibilities specific to human rights with regard to business activities in the digital sector.
4. Better understand the EU’s potential role as an international standard-setter, and the expectations from actors in civil society and the private sphere.

### Methodology

This working group will host one main thematic session (open to the general public) and two smaller interactive sessions: one open, and the other a closed session exclusive to human rights defenders. The sessions will allow the participation of various stakeholders bringing different perspectives from the business community, the public sector and civil society, including human rights defenders with experience on the ground. Participants will build on their concrete experience to draw specific recommendations for action by the EU.

**Main thematic session (public)**

**“Human rights challenges and responses from IT companies: Where we are and where we can go”**

**10 December 2020, 10:30–12:30 CET**

The main session will focus on “big tech” businesses and social media. It aims to discuss the human rights challenges faced in this new digital environment, and the responses to such challenges provided by IT companies and international law.

**Interactive session I (closed)**

**“Enabling engagement of civil society with business and its processes”**

**9 December 2020, 12.00–13.30 CET**

The first interactive session will serve to discuss how new digital technologies can be used by civil society and human rights defenders, and what should be done to empower them, including for example to enhance transparency, accountability, monitoring and reporting of business processes (a key step in effective human rights due diligence).

**Interactive session II (public)**

**“Obligations for states and companies in a digital age – reflection on their respective roles and responsibilities”**

**9 December 2020, 16.30–18.00 CET**

The second interactive session will serve to discuss the respective responsibilities of states and companies to identify, mitigate and address human rights impacts from new digital technologies, with a focus on due-diligence standards in supply chains.