



Dialogue as a Pathway to Change: UNDP and the African Business and Human Rights Forum

Reflections on five years of convening, 2022–2025

By The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

Introduction: Why Dialogue Matters in Business and Human Rights?

The business and human rights (BHR) agenda occupies a difficult space. It sits at the intersection of trade policy, labour regulation, environmental governance, corporate practice and the lived experience of communities affected by economic activity. No single ministry owns it. No single regulator can enforce it. No single institution holds all the levers required to move it. Progress therefore depends less on any one actor's authority than on the ability of many actors to reach a common understanding of the problem and a workable division of responsibility for solving it.

That is the premise on which the African Business and Human Rights Forum (ABHRF) was built, and it is the premise that has shaped UNDP's engagement with it. Since 2022, the Forum has positioned itself as the continental platform for convening, dialogue, exchange, deliberation, discussion and networking on BHR in Africa. Over four editions it has grown into a multi-stakeholder platform for BHR and responsible business conduct (RBC), not by acquiring formal powers, but by becoming the place where the relevant actors reliably meet.

UNDP is one of seven co-organisers of the Forum, alongside the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), UNICEF, the United Nations Global Compact, the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights, the African Union Commission (AUC) and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR). This chapter reflects on what that collaboration has produced, why the dialogue model underpinning it has worked, and what it suggests for the next phase of BHR practice in Africa.

A crowded and uneven global landscape

Comparable dialogues are taking place elsewhere. The annual Global BHR Forum convenes in Geneva; the Responsible Business and Human Rights Forum serves Asia; the East African Dialogue operates at sub-regional level; and, more recently, the Arab Dialogue has emerged. The levels, depth and scope of these conversations vary considerably. What they share is a common reference point: the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), and the recognition that these platforms function both as spaces for dialogue and as vehicles for raising awareness, building consensus and advancing implementation of the UNGPs.

Africa's position within that landscape has been distinctive. The continent was not a central participant in the first decade of UNGP implementation, and the tenth anniversary of the Guiding Principles offered a natural moment to assess that gap. It was against this backdrop that UNDP undertook the study "A Baseline Assessment on Business and Human Rights in Africa: From the First Decade to the Next", to evaluate the progress made on BHR across the continent. The assessment gave the emerging continental conversation something it had lacked – an evidence base of its own.

Why dialogue, and not only policy

Policy adoption and policy implementation are different problems, and they fail for different reasons. A national action plan (NAP) can be drafted by technical experts; it cannot be implemented without ministries that understand their obligations, businesses that accept the standard, civil society organisations with the standing to raise concerns, and affected communities with a route to remedy. Implementation depends on relationships, trust and legitimacy – conditions that are built between institutions over time, not legislated into existence.

A convening does not itself change policy.

What it changes is the set of relationships through which policy becomes implementable.



This is where a sustained dialogue platform earns its place. It creates repeated contact between actors who otherwise engage each other only adversarially or not at all. It allows disagreement to be aired in a setting where it does not carry immediate legal or commercial consequence. And it makes it possible to arrive at a shared account of the problem before negotiating solutions – the sequence that distinguishes durable agreements from communiqués.

Pathways to Change: How the Model Works

The Forum's design reflects deliberate choices rather than administrative convenience. Three features have proved central.

Intentional thematic sequencing

Each year, the co-organisers have been intentional about the Forum's theme and its implications for the wider BHR agenda in Africa. The intent has been that each Forum builds on the success and theme of the one before it, producing a cumulative arc rather than four discrete events:

- **Accra, 2022** — laid the Forum's foundation with an evaluation of the first decade of the UNGPs, under the theme "The African Decade: Shaping the Next 10 Years of Business and Human Rights". The Forum brought together 350 delegates and 15 partners. Convened while the world was still contending with the economic effects of COVID-19, it made the case that human rights issues cannot wait, nor be set aside, during a global crisis.
- **Addis Ababa, 2023** — addressed anchoring the Forum in policy action, with an emphasis on Africa for Africa. Hosted at the African Union Headquarters with over 450 delegates under the theme "For Africa, From Africa", it focused on home-grown and Africa-centred solutions and opened new thematic ground: rights of the child in supply chains, the nexus between BHR and labour and migration, the interconnectedness of trade, regulation and supply chains with conflict, and the role of rights-holders in ensuring accountability. The timing was deliberate — the AU had designated 2023 the year for "Acceleration of Implementation" of the AfCFTA.
- **Nairobi, 2024** — responded to a visible shift in the development space, driven by a global super-election year and the reprioritisation of government policy from development towards security and defence, with trade increasingly framed as the basis for development financing. Under the theme "Promoting Responsible Business Conduct in a Rapidly Changing Context", the Forum convened over 500 delegates and 100 speakers across 35 panels, and produced the Nairobi Declaration as a shared commitment by all stakeholders.
- **Lusaka, 2025** — marked a strategic shift from expanding the conversation to delivering concrete action. Under the theme "From Commitment to Action: Advancing Remedy, Reparations and Responsible Business Conduct in Africa", over 620 delegates attended. The theme aligned with the AU's 2025 theme, "Justice for Africans and People of African Descent through Reparations", and an integral part of the Forum was the opportunity to evaluate the Nairobi Declaration.

The sequence matters analytically. Establishing a platform, anchoring it institutionally, responding to a changed external context and then testing delivery against prior commitments is a progression, not a series of annual topics. It is also what allowed the 2025 Forum to hold stakeholders to what had been agreed in 2024 – an accountability step that would not have been available to a platform without continuity.

Rotation across sub-regions

The Forum has been organised across three sub-regions of Africa – West, East and Southern Africa. This has not been a matter of geographic fairness alone. In countries where the Forum has been hosted, the BHR agenda has gained greater visibility, alongside increased engagement with National Action Plan processes and responsible business conduct. The Forum and its partners have provided a platform for sustaining regional discourse on BHR, strengthening engagement with national stakeholders, and supporting efforts to translate commitments into action.

A partnership model rather than an institutional one

The Forum's success has depended substantially on strategic partnership, engagement and collaboration with governments, the African Union, the United Nations system, civil society, academia, the private sector, National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs), law firms and trade and labour unions. Central to this is the UN–AU partnership, guided by the UN–AU collaboration framework, including the AU–UN framework on human rights. The co-organisers have leveraged the respective frameworks and mandates of each institution rather than duplicating them.

Beyond the seven co-organisers, more than 80 partners have contributed – civil society organisations, faith-based organisations, law firms and others. Across the four Forums, over 2,000 delegates have participated: 350 in Accra in 2022, 450 in Addis Ababa in 2023, over 510 in Nairobi in 2024 and 620 in Lusaka in 2025. This growth reflects the Forum's evolution into a dynamic and vibrant regional space for dialogue and awareness-raising on the UNGPs.

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At the centre of the growth from Accra to Lusaka is investment in strategic partnerships, advocacy, regional leadership, multi-stakeholder engagement, and inter-agency collaboration and coordination.

What the Model Has Produced?

Three outcomes are documented in the Forum's record to date.

1. National Action Plans on business and human rights

The clearest policy contribution has been to the adoption of NAPs, which provide a roadmap for integrating the UNGPs into national policies and practices and thereby advance the BHR agenda at local level. This is the point at which continental dialogue converts into domestic obligation, and it is the outcome against which the Forum's value is most readily assessed.

2. The Nairobi Declaration and its evaluation

The Nairobi Declaration, developed and endorsed at the 2024 Forum, was a shared commitment by all stakeholders. Its significance lies less in its adoption than in what followed: the 2025 Forum in Lusaka included the evaluation of the Declaration as an integral part of its agenda. A commitment that is reviewed in public, a year later, in front of the constituencies that made it, functions differently from one that is merely issued.

3. Sustained national uptake

Increased uptake of the BHR agenda has been observed since the Forum in Ghana, Ethiopia, Mozambique and, most recently, Zambia. The partners engaged through the Forum have helped sustain and strengthen not only regional discourse on BHR but also engagement with national stakeholders and the development of NAPs – and, overall, the translation of commitments into action.

Lessons Learned

Four editions of the Forum have surfaced a set of lessons that are operational rather than aspirational. Each is drawn from the Forum's own experience.

Collaborative partnership translates into ownership

The Forum's success has been driven by partners' collaboration and co-creation. Where an agenda is co-owned by governments, UN agencies, civil society and business, it is considerably harder for any single constituency to dismiss it as external or partial. Ownership, in this model, is a product of the process rather than a communications objective layered on top of it.

Regional balance and inclusion promote awareness and advocacy

Hosting the Forum across the continent has promoted regional ownership, inclusivity and advancement of the agenda. Expanding the Forum to North and Central Africa, and fostering sub-regional dialogues, would further strengthen stakeholder engagement and regional cooperation.

Autonomy and alignment must be held together

For the Forum to remain a space of safety and neutrality — an environment in which stakeholders can engage freely on difficult questions — its independence and neutrality must be maintained even as it engages closely with host governments. This is a standing tension rather than a solved problem, and it requires active management at each edition.

Momentum must be sustained between Forums

The Forum's progress has shown the importance of sustaining momentum, through continued engagement with host governments, technical support, and peer-to-peer learning among governments. Governments that indicate an interest in hosting and demonstrate commitment towards localising the UNGPs should continue to be encouraged and accompanied.

The financing model has proved the concept but constrains the scale

The Forum has been funded with resources pooled from the co-organisers and partners. Despite the co-organisers' limited resources, it has succeeded because partners have committed additional funding to cover various costs. While this model continues to work, the co-organisers' investment matters: the Forum is a major regional deliverable with the potential to generate significant longer-term impact.

Government engagement drives localisation

Engaging and working closely with governments — particularly ministries of justice and foreign affairs, other line ministries and MDAs — has been instrumental in securing national ownership and localising the agenda at country level. Increased uptake of the BHR agenda has been observed since the Forums held in Ghana, Ethiopia, Mozambique and Zambia.

Looking Forward: The Future of Dialogue in Business and Human Rights

As the Forum approaches its fifth edition, continuity, strategic initiatives and expanded stakeholder engagement will be essential to advancing progress, informing future strategies and engagement, and delivering concrete outcomes. Four priorities follow directly from the experience set out above.

- **Institutionalisation.** Establishing the Forum as a yearly continental mechanism for assessing progress on the BHR agenda in Africa would convert an annual convening into a standing accountability process, with the reporting and evaluation cycle that implies.
- **Capacity of duty-bearers.** Strengthening the capacity of duty-bearers is necessary to ensure that judicial reforms and access to remedy are strengthened in practice – the area in which progress is typically slowest and most resource-intensive.
- **Private sector participation.** Continued engagement with the private sector, through the UN Global Compact, the International Organisation of Employers and other stakeholders, is required to increase business participation in the Forum.
- **Youth engagement.** Expanding the discussions to include opportunities for youth engagement would support both accountability and ownership, and build the constituency on which the agenda's longer-term durability depends.

Key messages

For policymakers, the Forum's record suggests that BHR commitments travel furthest when they are made in the presence of the constituencies expected to implement them, and when a mechanism exists to revisit them. For development partners, it demonstrates that a pooled, partnership-based model can deliver continental convening on limited resources – and that the constraint on scale is now financing rather than design. For practitioners, it indicates that convening is a method, not an event: its value accrues through repetition, sequencing and follow-through.

The wider point is straightforward. Business and human rights challenges in Africa are becoming more complex, not less, as trade integration deepens under the AfCFTA and as the financing landscape for development continues to shift. Complexity of that kind is not resolved by any one institution acting alone. It is resolved – slowly, and through relationships – by the actors involved arriving at a common understanding of what is at stake and an agreed division of responsibility for acting on it. That is what a dialogue platform is for, and it is why the ABHRF's next five years matter as much as its first.