

Private Sector

As a result of reduced staff during maternity leave, the IDSN Executive Group made a decision to scale down the Private Sector programme in order to align staff resources with workload. The activities of this programme were consequently reduced compared to the level envisaged for 2010, with a focus on feeding into existing processes and responding to ad hoc requests.

The trend of a slowly growing awareness of the need to incorporate considerations of caste in CSR policies among the business community in Europe and India continued in 2010. A number of media articles have drawn attention to the caste aspect of business and employment in India, including an analysis by India-CSR¹¹, which made the case for introducing special measure to eliminate caste discrimination using extensive references to documentation from the DSN-UK and IDSN and recommending the Ambedkar Principles¹² (AP) as a tool for companies wishing to avoid discrimination on the basis of caste.

Contacts made with German, British, Dutch and Danish companies indicate a genuine interest in pursuing ways to include anti-caste discrimination measures in their Indian operations.

With organisations such as the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) promoting a pro-active stance on caste among their members, it will be increasingly easier for European based companies to address the issue without hitting the barrier of cultural sensitivity, which has so far been the main obstacle for progress in this area. By signing up to the CII Code of Conduct on Affirmative Action, 700 companies, including 55 of India's largest companies, have decided to disclose the caste composition of their work force in their next annual report.

The Dalit Discrimination Check¹³ (DDC), alongside the Ambedkar Principles (AP), represent a cornerstone of IDSN's work to promote active measures in private sector operations. The DDC was developed in cooperation between the Danish Institute of Human Rights, IDSN and the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and launched as an online self-assessment tool for companies in 2008. Responding to feedback from companies, the DDC was re-launched in a new more adaptable version in 2010 with options for selecting specific sections of the tool.

Companies or other actors operating in a caste-affected environments can thus now choose to use the section(s) of primary relevance to their operations, rather than going through the full comprehensive checklist as was required in the first version. It is now possible to focus on one or more of the four sections on Employment Practices, Community Impact, Supply Chain and Utilities and Services and the company or organisation in question can tailor the tool to match their specific needs.

The Dutch and Danish governments recommend the AP and the DDC to companies operating in India and both countries have in 2010 responded to a call to take up the issue in connection with official trade delegation visits to India. The Dalit Network Netherlands (DNN) was invited to give a presentation to thirty corporate participants of the Dutch trade delegation, and the Danish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lene Espersen, highlighted caste discrimination as an important issue for Danish companies to include in CSR cooperation with their Indian counterparts during her interactions with the Danish-Indian business community. The Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs have furthermore published the Ambedkar Principles and Dalit Discrimination Check on their website.

The ISO 26000 standard on social responsibility for all organisations was finalised in 2010. The active engagement in the working group of a DNN staff member has secured recognition of caste discrimination with specific mentioning of people discriminated on the basis of caste in the section on vulnerable groups, with recommendations for organisations to contribute to its elimination. The standard has been developed by stakeholder groups comprising among others industry, government, labour, consumers, and NGOs, with working groups in 83 countries.

Reference in a widely recognised standard like the ISO 26000 is an important step for further acceptance of caste discrimination as a human rights issue to be considered in CSR policies of companies and organisations.

Involvement in the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) continues in the Netherlands, Denmark and the UK, the latter with representation at Board level and leadership in the cross-national ETI Stone group.

People discriminated against on the basis of descent, including caste: “Hundreds of millions of people are discriminated against because of their hereditary status or descent. This form of discrimination is based on a history of rights abuse justified by the wrongful notion that some people are considered unclean or less worthy because of the group into which they are born. An organization should avoid such practices and, where feasible, seek to contribute to eliminating these prejudices.” ISO 26000 on caste discrimination
