

Private sector

IDSN has engaged with international companies and some agencies for a number of years to promote active measures to avoid and eliminate caste discrimination in their operations in India. The cornerstone of this work has been the Ambedkar Principles (AP), a set of ten employment principles developed to assist companies in addressing caste-based discrimination. The AP were revised in 2009 jointly by the Dalit Network Netherlands (DNN) and IDSN and published in a redesigned booklet. The publication has been distributed to approximately 200 companies in Europe, a number of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives and other relevant actors, such as government agencies and civil society organisations.

In 2009, contacts with private companies in a number of European countries have shown a shift in terms of recognising caste discrimination as an issue relevant for companies, as well as a motivation for taking this aspect into the CSR work of the individual companies. Thus far the knowledge of the scope and systemic nature of caste discrimination has been limited among most representatives of companies and private sector actors contacted by IDSN, but an increase in awareness is evident. This development is a result of consistent work not only with individual companies, but with confederations of industry, CSR initiatives and other important actors, e.g. relevant government agencies. This puts caste discrimination on the map as a serious human rights violation that responsible companies are obliged to address. Approximately 25 members of the UN Global Compact – an initiative for businesses that wish to follow ten universal principles on human and labour rights, environment and anti-corruption – are mentioning caste as a form of discrimination they want to avoid. A number of Indian and a few international companies have a more active policy on combating caste discrimination.

The increased awareness of the issue is furthermore reflected in a demand for IDSN services, such as input for business seminars on CSR and several lectures at business schools, as well as a growing interest in the subject from CSR and business publications. By invitation two articles authored by DSN-UK and the IDSN secretariat were published in Business Outlook and CRnet respectively.

Promotion of the Dalit Discrimination Check (DDC) has been an important entry point when engaging with private companies. DDC was developed in 2008 in cooperation between the Danish Institute for Human Rights, the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and IDSN, as a practical application of the Ambedkar Principles with the aim of providing companies with a concrete tool to address caste discrimination in their Indian operations¹. DDC is now

“one of the most effective solutions to caste discrimination within India would be the extension of ‘reservation’ or ‘affirmative action’ into the private sector.”

Meena Varma, Director, DSN-UK, in an article in OutlookBusiness India

featured on the websites of a number of CSR networks and other relevant actors, including the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Danish Confederation of Industry, the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, the UN Practitioner’s Portal on HRBA programming and the Child Rights Information Centre.

In IDSN’s interactions with companies it has become clear that cultural barriers prevent even initial dialogue on the subject of caste discrimination with partners and associates in India. The issue is considered very sensitive, and international companies have expressed a need for guidance on how to open the necessary constructive discussions with their Indian counterparts before actual policies and measures can be introduced.

In response to this need, a manual was developed in 2008 for training companies to tackle the issue of caste discrimination, and the IDSN team with representatives of DSN-UK, the Danish Institute of Human Rights and the IDSN secretariat conducted a workshop in New Delhi using the training materials in March 2009. The aim was to investigate approaches to appropriate training for international companies addressing caste discrimination in the workplace. The workshop was attended by representatives of civil society, trade unions and CSR specialists, and

provided valuable feedback that was incorporated into the revised training programme. The assessment by the training team was that one or more partners with extensive experience in working with the private sector must be identified in India before substantial progress can be made with companies working there.

With the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies as an intermediary, IDSN met with private sector actors in India, such as the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and The Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry in India (ASSOCHAM). The purpose was two-fold; to use their experience to feed into the work with international companies and to promote the DDC. The CII gave an overview of their Affirmative Action Code of Conduct, which includes Indian companies such as TATA, Bharat Shell, HSBC India and HERO. The meeting provided valuable insights into the mindset of the private sector and the multinational companies in India. Meetings were also held with the Danish Trade Council, the EU delegation and Partners for Change.

These activities were supported significantly by the work undertaken nationally by a number of DSNs, most notably DNN and DSN-UK. The Ethical Trading Initiatives (ETI) has taken a special interest in the issue of caste discrimination and has invited input from DSNs. The DSN-UK is the lead NGO of the ETI UK Stone Group and helps to guide the member companies towards full implementation of the Base Code through their supply chains and to raise awareness of the extent of and need to address caste discrimination in India. DNN and DSN-DK gave elaborate input to the Good Practice Guide India of the Norwegian and Danish Ethical Trade Initiative to ensure mainstreaming of measures against caste discrimination in the CSR of companies. In the UK, the Netherlands and Denmark ETI are important fora for engaging with private companies and provide a recognised CSR platform through which to involve the business community and promote the Ambedkar Principles and the DDC.

The Dutch network has actively worked in the international working group on the International Standard on Social Responsibility, ISO26000, to include language on descent/caste based discrimination. The standard is to be finalised in the first half of 2010 and the inclusion of caste discrimination in the document is an important achievement, given the expected prominent status ISO 26000 will have as a key international standard for the social responsibility of companies and other organisations.

DSNs in the Netherlands, the UK, Germany and Denmark have contacted a number of companies in their respective countries for promotion of the AP and the DDC, and more general awareness raising on the issue of caste discrimination. In the Netherlands the Export Promotion Service of the Ministry of Economic Affairs is bringing the Ambedkar Principles (and DDC) to the attention of companies operating or planning to operate in India