Case Study: Millicom’s Impact Assessment

In 1990, Swedish investment company, Kinnevik and American company, Millicom Incorporated, combined their interests and have since come a long way. Today, Millicom is a fast-growing media and telecommunications company listed on the Swedish Stock Exchange. Millicom’s vision is to make affordable, useful and fun services available to everybody. As such, it is operating solely in Africa and Latin America, with over 56 million customers.

Company Action and Outcomes

A key element of implementing the responsibility to respect children’s rights is to conduct an impact assessment. As Millicom experienced, it can bring unexpected child rights aspects to light.

Millicom develops and operates cellular and cable networks in Africa and Latin America. Millicom has used the Children’s Rights and Business Principles to carry out an impact assessment. It was done on three levels: desk research on overall child rights risks for telecom companies, assessment of Millicom’s global policies and controls, and a country assessment in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The results surprised Millicom: The one risk that had triggered the impact assessment—child labour—there was no evidence of in the DRC operation.

But there were other observations, which the company had not considered previously: Would external security services who guard our base station sites and shops know how to deal with under-aged intruders? Another example is electronic waste. In emerging markets electronic waste may end up with local entrepreneurs who want to recover precious metals and other valuable components from them. There is a possibility that children may get involved. The children’s rights perspective helped Millicom be prioritize e-waste vendor selection. The company is now implementing a new process with pre-selected waste buyers.

The detailed impact assessment in DRC was both time-consuming and expensive. Internal buy-in was mainly achieved through perceived reputational risks connected with child labour. The results of the first assessment and a growing interest from investors has helped to build longer-term internal support. Millicom has continued to work closely with UNICEF to develop a sector-specific self-assessment tool, which enables internal staff to do an assessment that is highly relevant but not as complex as in the DRC, and costs can thus be kept down.

Using children’s rights as the main angle for the impact assessment facilitates talking about human rights in countries where starting a discussion about this topic may be sensitive. In countries with a difficult and often violent history, and in some cases continued political instability, it is not always easy to talk about human rights. We have learned that starting from a child rights perspective allows us to address many wider issues. Please contact CR@millicom.com for further information.