

## **Caste discrimination**

### **1. Preamble**

- 1.1 Caste discrimination occurs in a number of countries in South Asia including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. The issue of caste discrimination in India is a particular focus for corporate social responsibility due to the importance of India as an emerging market for transnational companies and the comparatively large number of people in India affected by caste discrimination.
- 1.2 Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are Indian population groupings that are specifically recognised by the Constitution of India. Scheduled Castes are groups (the largest being Dalits) that are recognised to fall outside one of the four recognised caste groupings. Scheduled Tribes comprise mainly indigenous peoples and small tribes collectively known as Adivasi.
- 1.3 Discrimination against people of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the labour market and workplace arises from a perception that the place of Dalits is to work in the service of others. Discrimination on the basis of caste continues to inhibit opportunities for around 200 million Dalit and Adivasi people in India.
- 1.4 Churches in India acknowledge that the practice of caste discrimination is contrary to God's purpose<sup>1</sup> and constitutes a form of racism<sup>2</sup>. There is also recognition that people of scheduled caste face discrimination within the church. While the church has advocated for more effective and equal protection for Dalits in society there is much still to be done to address attitudes and practices within church communities and structures.
- 1.5 In July 2003 the Methodist Conference adopted a motion expressing "deep concern over the inhuman system of caste discrimination". Conference called upon the governments of South Asia to address this issue in the context of the human rights conventions of which they are a part and directed the Connexional Team to continue to give appropriate priority to this concern.
- 1.6 In March 2009, the World Council of Churches issued the "Bangkok Declaration and Call"<sup>3</sup> acknowledging the lack of will on the part of the Government of India evident through the "failure to render justice for the Dalits through the police, the executive and the judiciary." The call asserts collusion of other governments that has led to a failure on the part of the international community to address caste discrimination.
- 1.7 The Methodist Church has provided support to the Dalit Solidarity Network which has been instrumental in the development of the Ambedkar Principles<sup>4</sup> and has promoted dialogue with UK companies with operations in India.

### **2. Key issues**

- 2.1 There has been significant effort on the part of the Government of India to address the issue of caste discrimination through legislation although frequently those of scheduled caste are unable to access the protection that such legislation affords. Discriminatory attitudes are deeply entrenched in centuries of tradition. Attitudes around discrimination are likely to be no less represented in a company workforce as they are in wider society.
- 2.2 People of Scheduled Castes/Tribes frequently do not have access to as high a quality of primary and secondary education. Lack of educational attainment militates against the entry of people from such groups into the skilled labour force.
- 2.3 The lack of English language skills form a barrier to career progression. Therefore people of Scheduled Caste are poorly represented in skilled or managerial roles.

- 2.4 Employment in the organised private sector accounts for only 2% of the workforce of India however the potential for exploitation of people of Scheduled Caste within the context of supply chains must also be considered.
- 2.5 Companies are encouraged to monitor the recruitment and promotion of people of scheduled cast. This requires applicants or employees to specify their caste and raises some dilemmas as such practices might counter the aspiration to challenge attitudes that characterise individuals by their social or cultural background.

### **3. Policy**

- 3.1 Dialogue on caste discrimination will be sought with companies with significant investment in India. This issue is likely to affect consideration concerning suitability for investment in instances in which a company is unresponsive on the issue and the dialogue with the company raises concerns over interpretation and implementation of ILO codes in a wider international context.
- 3.2 In addressing discrimination in the context of India, company policies should make explicit reference to discrimination on the basis of caste rather than relying on broader generic terms<sup>5</sup>.
- 3.3 Companies will be encouraged to have put in place affirmative action policies to address caste discrimination and ascribe to either the Ambedkar Principles or the Confederation of Indian Industry Affirmative Action Policy<sup>6</sup> that offer an appropriate framework for action.
- 3.4 Companies should be able to report to shareholders the progress made in enhancing the employment opportunities for people of Scheduled Caste within the context of recruitment and in career development.
- 3.5 Companies will be encouraged to address discrimination through their social responsibility programmes or in other ways highlighted in the CFB Position Paper on Caste Discrimination.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See for example The Church of North India mission statement, <http://www.cnisynod.org>

<sup>2</sup> "Indian church leaders call for an end to caste based discrimination also within the churches" <http://www.oikoumene.org/news/news-management/eng/a/article/1634/indian-christian-leaders.html>

<sup>3</sup> World Council of Churches: <http://www2.wcc-coe.org/pressreleasesen.nsf/index/Feat-09-04.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.idsn.org/AmbedkarPrincip.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> The UN Global Compact recognises that discrimination is often indirect and arises where practices have the appearance of neutrality but in fact lead to exclusions. See UN Global Compact Principle 6, <http://www.unglobalcompact.org/AboutTheGC/TheTenPrinciples/Principle6.html>

<sup>6</sup> [http://cii.in/menu\\_content.php?menu\\_id=462](http://cii.in/menu_content.php?menu_id=462)

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.cfbmethodistchurch.org.uk/ethics/index.html>