

**The Exotica and The Economica:  
The Human Rights Framework for Corporate Social Responsibility**

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The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations has enumerated the basic economic and social rights held by all persons. Article 23 states: "Everyone who works has the right to just and favorable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection." This basic right is further articulated in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and in the constitution of the International Labor Organization.

CREA has found it useful to divide the components of human rights into two groups: the Exotica and the Economica. We define the Exotica as those components related to issues that we hope no one will ever experience or endure: torture, abuse, unlawful imprisonment, etc. The rights associated with the Exotica are the exceptions, the oddities, the way things should not be, ever, for anyone. Most of the traditional human rights work has been and continues to be associated with the Exotica. The Exotica invoke images before our eyes of intense suffering of individuals and groups...and the work associated with the Exotica is to alleviate and prevent these sufferings. Part of the reason they demand such attention is that they have traditionally been seen as violational to what it means to be a human being.

Most often, human rights issues related to corporate social responsibility (CSR) have focused on the Exotica. There is usually an all-too-brief spotlight on a horrific situation in which aberrant behavior on the part of those with power affects those without the power. The focus is on the event, often without the systemic analysis of the situation that permits the abuse, as well as what is needed to address the systemic changes that are required to prevent further abuses in that situation or in parallel ones anywhere throughout the world.

In contrast, the Economica are those rights that affect the daily life of the person, family, community and country. The Economica are those rights that are dependent on income, on the ability to support oneself and one's family. The Economica are those rights associated with creating a community that can function as a whole while attending to the needs of its members.

The Economica are the rights associated with food and clothing and with access to education and the social systems in which we all live. The Economica are those rights associated with having a home, with employment and the ability to earn sufficient purchasing power for a decent standard of living. When these rights are violated, the suffering may be just as intense as in the violation of the Exotica rights; but it is often hidden away in homes, or in shelters, or on the streets, only revealed in infant mortality rates, increases in outbreaks of diseases, or lowered life expectancies.

The key to the Economica is the issue of wages or income and the purchasing power that results. Without sufficient purchasing power for a decent standard of living, the Economica human rights of the worker, the worker's family and, ultimately the community in which the worker lives are violated.

In addition, the Economica are what allow persons, families and communities to have control over their present and their future, not allowing every aspect of their existence to be determined by how profitable they can be for someone else. The whole issue of who gets to decide, to define, to determine how the future will be in any community is most often linked to economic power. If the Economica are not

recognized as intrinsic human rights, then that power will never be possible for most people. Even the whole issue of productivity transforms the human being into a machine saying that it is better to work faster and more, and denying the other aspects of the human being...of creativity, relationship, and existence in the social dynamics.

Within the *Economica*, it is possible to find some of the most consistently violated human rights, where people are forced to live and/or work in conditions that violate their human dignity. These violations, present in the past eras of colonization, can be seen in our times in the contract supplier system operative in most industries, where the competitive nature of the system forces the search for lower wages. While the media focus has often been on specific companies within an industry, it is the system within which these corporations must function that needs to be addressed if systemic change is going to take place.

The *Economica* demand an “unpacking” of the economic and social systems that govern on all levels. It is only with this unpacking that we will come to understand the systemic changes necessary to honor the right to food, to water, to work, to a home, etc. The unpacking needs to include asking “Who specifically?” when countries are being spoken about, e.g. when claiming that free trade will benefit a particular country, the question must be asked who within the country benefits? Are the benefits equally shared among the various segments of the society? Is the Common Good affected?

“Unpacking” the systems points to the inter-play between economic power and political power. At a time when major transnational corporations have wealth greater than that of numerous nations, their power is considerable. Through financial contributions to political campaigns and institutions, through exchange of incentives of various kinds, through the influence of their expertise in business and financial matters, and through their sophisticated legal resources, they have a powerful voice in all levels of the decision-making that affects the lives of millions of people.

Adding significantly to this mixture is the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) according to which World Trade Organization member states agree to open up selected areas of public services to private enterprises. These member states are submitting requests to each other about opening up specific areas of services. For example, the European Union is requesting that the United States open the water and environmental services area. For the present, the U.S. is declining. However, the WTO rules insist that if a service is open to competitive bidding, then it must follow the WTO rules about equal opportunity to all members. The complications of WTO rules and disciplines, along with its power to impose retaliatory sanctions, adds an additional element of seriousness to this situation.

How do concerned investors and consumers and ordinary citizens face these challenges? CREA suggests that a non-oppositional stance is crucial to interactions with management of such corporations. This entails a recognition that within the corporation are decent human beings who are themselves trying to (1) cope with the dilemmas presented by the globalization of the economy and the environmental crises and (2) meet the demands of shareholders as well as Wall Street and the other financial exchanges worldwide for ever-increasing profits. This approach also entails a recognition that all the individual and institutional investors who profit by the operations of these organizations, including the institutions on Wall Street, are in a real way involved in these “*Economica*” human rights crises, and have a responsibility to search for genuine answers, not simply answers that will maximize profits. It means reaching beyond rhetoric to the actions needed to correct the human and ecological crises that face us.