SOCIAL RISK AND OPPORTUNITY IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

INTERNATIONAL PROFESSIONAL CERTIFICATE

2025

IHRB
Institute for Human Rights and Business

Ove Arup Foundation

RAMBØLL FONDEN

This outline summarizes the core sections of an International Professional Certificate on social risk and opportunity in the built environment.

Grounded in human rights, the certificate supports action towards a just transition in the built environment - climate action that leaves no-one behind.

The certificate is developed by Institute for Human Rights and Business (IHRB) with support from the Ove Arup Foundation, and Ramboll Foundation and has undergone a process of stakeholder review and input. The certificate will be delivered by IHRB in partnership with expert knowledge providers and practitioners: we are also making this outline publicly available for use and adaptation by other organisations, to amplify its reach.

ABOUT IHRB

The Institute for Human Rights and Business is a global think and do tank founded in 2009. Its mission is to make human rights part of everyday business by shaping policy, advancing practice, and strengthening accountability. IHRB has a strong track record in providing education and training opportunities for professionals, on the why and how of managing social risks throughout companies' operations.

WHY THIS CERTIFICATE AND WHO SHOULD ENROLL?

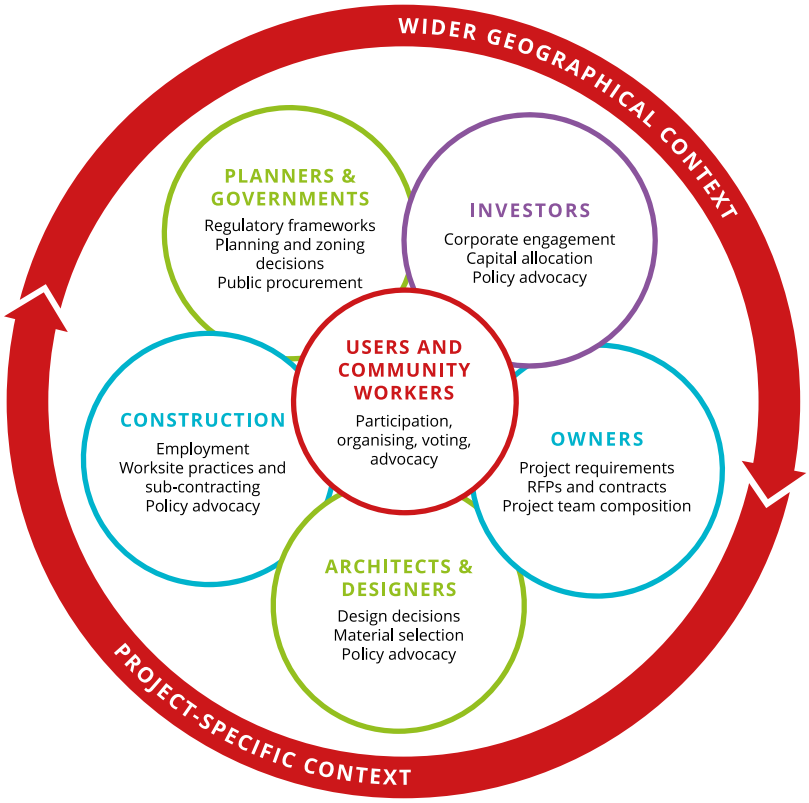
The built environment - cities and towns, buildings and infrastructure - has a transformational impact in people's lives: now and into the future. Yet social risks and outcomes are often a secondary concern to others, such as financial returns and decarbonization goals. With only 8.5% of infrastructure projects being delivered on time and on budget and decarbonisation and resilience projects often facing community push-back, managing risks and opportunities for people from the outset makes sense financially, environmentally, and socially. This certificate brings the social dimensions back to the forefront.

The certificate equips **current and future leaders working in the planning, financing and delivery of the built environment** with a practical grounding in human rights and social outcomes - particularly in the context of action on climate change, the environment, and digitization, as the basis for achieving social licence. The structure is designed to foster collaboration between different parts of the built environment lifecycle: participants will learn from the experiences of advocates, investors, designers and builders who contribute knowledge and case studies, as well as from each others' unique perspectives.

IHRB's report "Dignity by Design" and Framework for Dignity in the Built Environment provide a grounding for the certificate. The Framework is grounded in (and cross-references) international human rights standards, relevant guidance and principles such as the IFC Performance Standards, and the SDGs. The earliest stages of the built environment lifecycle - planning and financing - have a determining influence on all that follows, while "silo-busting" between disciplines is key to unlocking positive outcomes:

The Built Environment Lifecycle

Leverage Across the Built Environment



Infographics from the Framework for Dignity in the Built Environment (full Framework available for download here): i. risks and opportunities for people throughout the lifecycle; and ii. the continuum of decision-makers' roles and leverage points.

CERTIFICATE MODULES

Certificate modules are summarized below. Each will be accompanied by input from practitioners and real-world case studies and dilemmas, engaging directly with the role of finance and the private sector.

FOUNDATIONS

Introduction to human rights and the built environment

Human rights reflect the inherent dignity of a person. The human rights framework delineates clear duties of governments (national and local), and responsibilities of private sector actors, and provides a clear and internationally-recognized blueprint for managing social risks and maximizing social outcomes. It covers a wide breadth of rights - from the right to physical and mental health, to workers' rights - as well as the cross-cutting dimensions of non-discrimination, meaningful participation, accountability and transparency. Built environment investors and companies can apply human rights at organizational level - guiding strategy and process - and at the level of specific projects.

Leverage: Roles, responsibilities, accountability around the lifecycle

Investing time at the earliest stages of a project in addressing the "who", "why" and "how" can transform its long-term impact. While the earliest stages of the project lifecycle - planning and financing - are definitional, it is important to look out across the full lifecycle (from design and construction, to management and use, to re-use or re-development), to map what the risks and opportunities may be, involve key stakeholders in decision-making and adjust plans and procurement accordingly.

Participants will be introduced to the Framework for Dignity in the Built Environment as a foundational practical tool and touch-point for the course, and explore points of leverage between actors: such as investment decisions and engagement; client selection; contracts; and supplier due diligence.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION BY THEME

Note: Through the first iteration of the certificate, the following focus areas have been selected. There is the opportunity for future modules to cover additional areas of rights, including: indigenous rights and the right to free, prior and informed consent; the rights of nature; the right to water; and the right to physical and mental health.

It begins with land: Urban planning, acquisition and ownership

The built environment begins and ends with the question of land: who owns it, its use, and who has access. Land use decisions determine the trajectory of economic development, of social opportunity, and of environmental protection. Population growth and urbanisation are projected to add 2.5 billion people to the world's urban population by 2050. This puts huge pressure on land, which is a finite resource – not only within urban areas but also the surrounding rural areas on which they depend. This module will examine the role of territorial planning and zoning in advancing human rights and climate outcomes; the importance of transparency on who owns land; and what due process in land acquisition looks like, including the avoidance of direct or indirect involvement in forced evictions.

The right to meaningful participation: Design with and for whom?

Architects, engineers and master-planners are positioned between the end-users and people who will be impacted by a project, and their clients. Through practical examples this module will explore questions such as: What is the role of built environment companies in advocating "up" to clients for more human rights-based approaches to design of public and private places and buildings, and advocating "out" for policies that enable it? How does the design process and decision-making exclude or include certain groups of peoples or individuals - from people experiencing homelessness, to youth, to people with disabilities, to immigrant populations? What are the various tiers of participation, from information-sharing through to agency over outcomes? How can participation strategies themselves take account of the power dynamics and disparities among participants? And how do public and private ownership structures enable or restrict diverse users of places?

Corruption, human rights and climate action

The Odebrecht scandal may be the most high-profile example of corruption in infrastructure and its implications for people and politics. But corruption abounds: an estimated 10-30% of investment in infrastructure is lost through corruption and mismanagement; and there is growing awareness of the risks of corruption in climate finance. This has direct consequences for multiple human rights, including the right to participation in public affairs, non-discrimination, and access to water, health services, and energy. And, as the high death rate in the 2023 Turkey/Syria earthquake due to un-enforced building codes showed - the right to life. This module will look at specific examples of the links between corruption, human rights and climate action, and steps that can help eradicate cultures of corruption.

The building materials supply chain: Risks and opportunities for people and planet

Approximately half of extracted materials are used in the built environment. These include materials for the green transition. For example copper is a key material for the electrification of buildings. Yet the process of mining copper is often accompanied by human rights abuses, such as displacement and harmful working conditions. And of the top 300 undeveloped copper orebodies globally, 47% are on or close to indigenous lands and 65% are in high water risk areas. What are the global human rights implications of the material supply chain, and the combined social and environmental opportunities in the generation of circular and localized material production?

Construction workers rights - on site and through supply chains

Approximately seven percent of the world's workforce is in construction. Given the industry's tight margins and multiple layers of subcontracting, exploitation of construction workers on site and through supply chains is pervasive. This includes wage theft, indebtedness for recruitment fees, hazardous working conditions, and inadequate housing for migrant workers, and at the extreme, forced labor. Trade unions work to strengthen the rights of construction workers, but for many construction workers opportunities to form and join unions are limited. At the same time, there is a significant under-representation of women in the construction industries, influencing how places are planned, designed and built. What are examples of structural changes that can improve conditions for construction workers, and break down gender barriers?

The right to adequate housing

The right to adequate housing still remains out of reach for many, with over a billion people living in informal settlements, and with the cost of housing in relation to average incomes on the rise in many regions. In international law, the right to housing has seven core elements: security of tenure; availability of services, materials facilities and infrastructure; affordability; habitability; accessibility; location; and cultural adequacy. All these elements have heightened resonance in the context of global climate change. In what ways can finance and industry contribute better to realizing the right to adequate housing for all, and what kinds of economic innovation are needed?

Pathways to just transitions in the built environment

A "just transition" involves "greening the economy in a way that is as fair and inclusive as possible to everyone concerned, creating decent work opportunities and leaving no one behind" (ILO). In the context of the built environment this means advancing decarbonization, resilience, and circular business models in ways that respect workers' rights, the right to housing, non-discrimination, social dialogue and participation, accompanied by the related shifts in business models. What are the pathways towards a just transition and the roles of the public and private sector actors involved? This module will draw on context-specific insights from eight cities and the international-level advocacy of IHRB and partners' global project "Building for Today and the Future: Advancing a Just Transition in the Built Environment".

Technology: Smart cities, digital rights and non-discrimination

Technology plays an increasingly intrinsic role in the planning and delivery of the built environment. "Smart city" strategies can improve efficiency, sustainability, communication, and connectivity. They can also deepen existing inequality - both through the diversion of stretched-budgets from essential services and by benefiting only a few - and bring human rights risks such as discrimination, targeting of minority groups, and abuses of privacy. What planning and accountability mechanisms are needed to ensure that technology within the built environment contributes to the realization of rights, rather than undermining them?

For more information, visit the IHRB Built Environment Academy.