

Business & Human Rights Research Clinic

Consumer sensitivity to human rights credentials
of electrical appliances

Report - July 2025

Life Is On

 Schneider
Electric

This work is the result of a collaboration between the Inclusive Economy Center and the Impact Company Lab of the Sustainability & Organizations Institute at HEC Paris. We acknowledge the financial support of our corporate partner Schneider Electric.

Designed by a pedagogical team composed of Charles Autheman, HEC Paris Lecturer; Brian Hill, HEC Paris and CNRS Professor and Academic Director of the Inclusive Economy Center; and Maureen Sigliano, Executive Director of the Impact Company Lab. The project benefited 6 students from the HEC Master in Sustainability and Social Innovation.



About the HEC Paris Inclusive Economy Center:

The HEC Paris Inclusive Economy Center is dedicated to providing new ideas and insights to help businesses contribute to building an inclusive society with a positive and responsible impact. In a changing world facing a variety of multi-faceted crises, the Center recognizes the continued importance of social cohesion and justice for navigating these crises successfully and robustly.

Part of the HEC Sustainability & Organizations Institute, and a pioneer in this space at HEC Paris since 2008, the Center federates expertise on a range of topics, with a focus on two challenges that are particularly relevant today: designing organizational eco-systems that resiliently support the social good, and understanding and enhancing the social cohesion essential for collective and individual well-being. Through its research, teaching, and engagement with businesses and policymakers, it aims to drive meaningful change, equipping organizations with the tools to lead in an increasingly complex world.



About the HEC Paris Impact Company Lab

Co-founded with Schneider Electric in September 2023, the HEC Paris Impact Company Lab is a leading experimentation platform focused on concretely growing multi-national companies' ability to drive a just transition in a rapidly changing world. It takes an integrated, innovative and future focused approach to the multi-dimensional 'impact' challenges that its partners are tackling.

This interdisciplinary approach enables more holistic understanding of impact driven strategies. This includes: listening to the voices of the places which have most at stake (megacities), leading human-centered engaged research that is both rigorous & relevant, creating experiential learning experiences that harness collective intelligence, focusing on collaboration and systemic value creation.

Part of the HEC Sustainability & Organizations Institute, the Impact Company Lab thus forges the connections required to push forward new frontier knowledge & practices. As a result, it empowers its partners with thought leadership, tools to scale best "impact" practices, & the ability grow the returns of impact investments.

Introduction

During the 2024-2025 academic year, six students from HEC's Sustainability and Social Innovation Master 2 program worked to resolve a complex, real-world, problem submitted by Schneider Electric, a French multinational enterprise operating in the energy sector. Under the guidance of an interdisciplinary team of academics and in close collaboration with key stakeholders within and outside of the corporate partner, they spent seven months on the case, developing concrete and actionable recommendations that align with Schneider Electric's Social Excellence Program and its broader sustainability strategy.¹ These recommendations were presented to all parties of the project during a final workshop organized at Schneider Electric headquarters mid-April 2025.

A word about clinical education

Higher education institutions have always grappled with the tension between theoretical and practical teaching. One classic example of this tension is to be found in medical education where students are expected to receive initial non-practical education, sometimes referred to as **preclinical**, followed by practical education, referred to as **clinical**.

In the United States, legal educators have considered combining theoretical and practical education for nearly a century, interested in tapping in the combination of both pedagogies to best equip future practitioners. In 1933, legal philosopher Jerome Frank penned an article in the University of Pennsylvania Law Review titled *Why not a clinical lawyer school?*² In the second part of the century, clinical education became an integral part of American legal education³ and soon after expanded to the United Kingdom and then Europe. Business schools started launching clinical programs more recently, mostly through their law programs and afterwards as standalone "business clinics".

* * *

Business & Human Rights clinics

The HEC clinic served as a pilot clinical program with the objective of assessing the relevance of business clinical education for undergraduate and graduate students of HEC Paris management programs. The

¹ [Schneider Electric corporate sustainability strategy](#)

² [Why not a clinical lawyer-school?](#), Jerome Frank, University of Pennsylvania Law Review, 1933.

³ Prof. David Chavkin estimating the number of clinical professors in law schools around the country to be 1,800 in the early 2000's.

Figure from [Training for Justice: The Global Reach of Clinical Legal Education](#), Richard J. Wilson, Penn State International Law Review, 2004.

structure of the clinic was partly inspired by different experiences, most notably HEC's EU Public Interest Clinic and the University of Geneva's Business and Human Rights clinic.

The EU Public Interest Clinic at HEC Paris

The [EU Public Interest Clinic](#) was started in January 2014 by HEC Paris Law professor Alberto Alemanno. For the past decade, the clinic has been offering students enrolled in different legal programs at HEC Paris (LLM, law strategy) the opportunity to participate in clinics for the benefit of NGOs seeking representation in EU-related matters.

The clinic was run as a joint program with NYU School of Law for the 2014-2018 period and has since been organized exclusively by HEC Paris. Based on the learnings of the clinic and with the contribution of leading clinical professors, Alberto Alemanno co-edited a book on the contribution of clinical education to the reinvention of legal teaching in Europe.⁴

The University of Geneva Business and Human Rights clinic

In 2020, the Geneva Center for Business and Human Rights developed the first Business and Human Rights clinic which was launched the following year with support from the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. Since its inception, the school has been running a yearly clinic, collaborating with companies (Holcim, Microsoft) as well as a multistakeholder initiative in the field of private security (International Code of Conduct Association). The clinic received the University of Geneva [award for pedagogic innovation](#) and a toolkit was drafted to share lessons learned and practical advice for business schools interested in setting up similar clinics.⁵

The HEC Clinic: A Problem-Driven Research Approach

To the existing clinical structure, the HEC clinic added a Problem-Driven Research dimension. Some concrete business problems may prove intractable due to the lack of scientific knowledge, which has just not yet been developed. Focused on such cases, Problem-Driven Research Clinics involve academics working in close collaboration with students to undertake the relevant scientific research. Following the analogy with medical education, a Problem-Driven Research Clinic is the equivalent of students doing their

⁴ [Reinventing Legal Education](#), Alberto Alemanno and Lamin Khadar, Cambridge University Press, 2018.

⁵ [The Business and Human Rights Clinic - A Toolkit for Business Schools](#), Berit Knaak and Dorothée Baumann-Pauly, 2024.

internship in a research hospital, where they not only treat patients, but in doing so work with researchers to better understand diseases and develop new cures.

Team

The clinic involved several dozen different stakeholders from HEC Paris, Schneider Electric and the Business and Human Rights field. The core team was composed of:

Students from HEC Paris' master program in Sustainability and Social Innovation (6)

Fleur Colson, Angélique Sakura Gaudin, Sofia Guilbert, Eve Gitton, Albane Marion and Lima Safi. The students had diverse backgrounds in sustainability consulting, finance, social entrepreneurship, and international development.

Teachers associated with HEC Paris' Sustainability and Organizations (S&O) Institute (3)

Charles Autheman (Lecturer in Business & Human Rights), Brian Hill (Professor HEC Paris, Directeur de Recherche CNRS), and Maureen Sigliano (Executive Director of the S&O Impact Company Lab).

Members of Schneider Electric Human Rights team (2)

Frédéric Pinglot (VP Human Rights) and Mathias Brachet (Human Rights Project Leader).

The sponsor of the program was Gilles Vermot-Desroches (SVP Corporate Citizenship).

Clinical question

The clinic was guided by a central question: **Are consumers' purchasing behavior sensitive to human rights characteristics and/or information on human rights characteristics of products?**

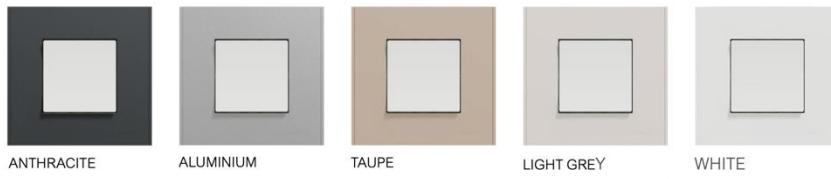
Several sub-questions followed from the central guiding question:

- *What do firms know and what can they communicate about the extent of human rights guarantees in their value chains?*
- *If consumers' purchasing behavior are sensitive to human rights characteristics of products, which human rights dimensions are they most sensitive to?*
- *How should the information be communicated to the consumer? A label? A scorecard? A dashboard?*

Given the partially scientific nature of the question, a Problem-Driven Research format was considered relevant; researchers with expertise on “social attitudes” were invited onto the team. Considering the broad dimension of the question, a specific product line – in this case the Unica product line – was selected to serve as case study for the clinic.

The Unica product line

Unica was an ideal candidate for the objectives of the clinic due to its modular design approach, diverse component makeup, and global market presence across 24 countries. This product range combines remarkable design with broad functionality, offering over 150 practical functions through various wiring devices, desk units, floor sockets, and workstations. The Unica's universal square 45x45 format makes it adaptable for both commercial and residential applications, presenting a manageable yet representative sample of Schneider's supply chain complexity. Moreover, Unica is a visible product line, being part of the Home & Distribution business unit, and potentially sold B2C. By focusing on this single product line, students were able to develop targeted traceability solutions that could potentially scale across Schneider Electric's broader operations while testing consumer appetite for human rights disclosures in a controlled environment.



Life is On | Schneider Electric

Timeline

The seven months of the clinic were broken down in two key phases: a knowledge acquisition phase (October-December 2024) during which students participated in a course on Business and Human Rights and a knowledge application phase (January-April 2025) during which the students conducted interviews and empirical research to draw the baseline of their final recommendations. Regular touchpoints between the students, faculty and corporate partners structured the overall experience.

Highlights from the knowledge acquisition phase

October-December 2024

The clinic touches on several important issues which are widely discussed in the field of business and human rights. For students to be able to fully engage with stakeholders on such issues, the knowledge acquisition phase focused on building the students capacity on:

- Business and human rights conceptual and legal frameworks: students learned about the historical timeline leading to the adoption of voluntary and mandatory guidelines (OECD guidelines, ILO MNE declaration, United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, various human rights duty of vigilance and due diligence legislations). Through case studies with various companies, they were able to understand operation challenges faced by corporations with regards to addressing human rights issues within their operations and value chain.
- Value chain complexity, upstream and downstream traceability: representatives from Schneider Electric and several other companies (Accor, Pernod Ricard) introduced the students to the challenges faced by large Multinational Enterprises in managing human rights within their supply chain. This included presenting vigilance programs, sharing promising sustainable procurement initiatives – including multistakeholder initiatives – and digging into existing research on the “social cost” of goods.
- Critical human rights issues in the energy sector: sector- and company-specific information were provided to the students to help them familiarize with the context of the corporate partner. This was important to help students focus on specific topics within the broad range of Business and Human Rights issues.

Highlights from the knowledge application phase

January-April 2024

The Clinic adopted a multi-method approach that combined desk research, stakeholder interviews, and an online behavioral experiment to generate comprehensive insights.

1. Desk Research

The students began their study by analyzing corporate reports, academic literature, regulatory frameworks, and industry benchmarks.⁶ During this process, they quickly discovered that transparency on social attributes of products is significantly less developed than environmental disclosures, making it difficult to find comparable benchmarks for social impact products. They also observed that while some industries are quite advanced on human rights and traceability, it is not the case of the electric and electronic industry.

This gap led the students to examine environmental transparency initiatives more closely, including Schneider Electric's own Green Premium program, as the environmental field is more advanced and offers valuable lessons for social metrics integration. By analyzing environmental disclosure frameworks, they were able to identify potential synergies between environmental and social reporting systems that could leverage the company's existing expertise and infrastructure while minimizing the burden on suppliers. This comparative approach between environmental and social transparency proved in developing recommendations grounded in Schneider Electric's strengths rather than creating entirely new systems.

2. Stakeholder Interviews

To bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and operational realities, the students conducted interviews with both internal and external stakeholders. These conversations proved helpful in uncovering nuanced challenges, identifying hidden opportunities, and contextualizing the findings within the complex landscape of global value chains and human rights due diligence. Through structured yet open-ended discussions with diverse perspectives the team gained important insights, complementing the findings from the desk research. Interviewees included:

- **Internal Stakeholders:** staff from procurement, sustainability, marketing, and product management teams.
- **External Stakeholders:** Business and Human Rights experts Olena Uvarova (Wageningen University), Vicky Bowman (IHRB), Michael Posner (NYU Stern) and a consultancy firm working on measuring decent work, Tanalah Monitoring.⁷

The stakeholder interviews yielded insights that directly informed the final recommendations. By engaging with internal teams, the students identified opportunities for advancing human rights transparency. When

⁶ See for example Schneider Electric's Supplier Code of Conduct : <https://www.se.com/ww/en/download/document/Supplier-code-of-conduct/>, Schneider Electric's Sustainability Reports: <https://www.se.com/ww/en/about-us/sustainability/sustainability-reports/>

⁷ Some of these conversations were organized on the sidelines of public conferences held at HEC Paris, illustrating how the Business and Human Rights clinic can complement broader awareness raising efforts within business schools.

interviewing the team overseeing the environmental data dashboard, student discovered that Schneider Electric could leverage existing infrastructures to embed social metrics.

The interviews also revealed significant challenges in supplier traceability beyond tier 1. This finding highlighted the need for phased implementation, starting with high-impact suppliers and gradually expanding as maturity increases. Geographic variations in human rights risks emerged as another critical theme, with interviewees noting that issues like excessive working hours or wage concerns require tailored approaches rather than one-size-fits-all solutions.

External expert interviews complemented these internal perspectives. They emphasized the importance of proactive human rights management rather than reactive crisis responses, suggesting that cross-sector collaboration (particularly with industries facing similar challenges) could accelerate progress on specific human rights concerns. These conversations also offered insights into the practical challenges associated with “measuring” decent work, notably in remote geographies.

3. Online behavioral experiment

To quantify consumer preferences, the students designed and conducted an online behavioral experiment with a representative sample of around 300 participants. The experiment measured willingness to pay (WTP)⁸ for products offering different levels of guarantees concerning workers’ treatment across four key human rights metrics: forced labour, occupational safety and health, living wage, and worker representation.

A word about terminology

When designing the experiment with the academic team, the students made a deliberate choice to avoid using technical or potentially alienating terms such as “forced labour” or “living wage.” Instead, they opted for simplified, accessible definitions that focused on the concrete experiences of workers. For example, whether workers are free to choose their jobs, paid enough to cover basic needs, or represented in workplace decision-making. While this approach may limit the legal or academic precision of each term, it was essential to ensure that participants from a general audience could fully understand the issues at stake. This trade-off allowed the experiment to capture more authentic and informed consumer preferences.

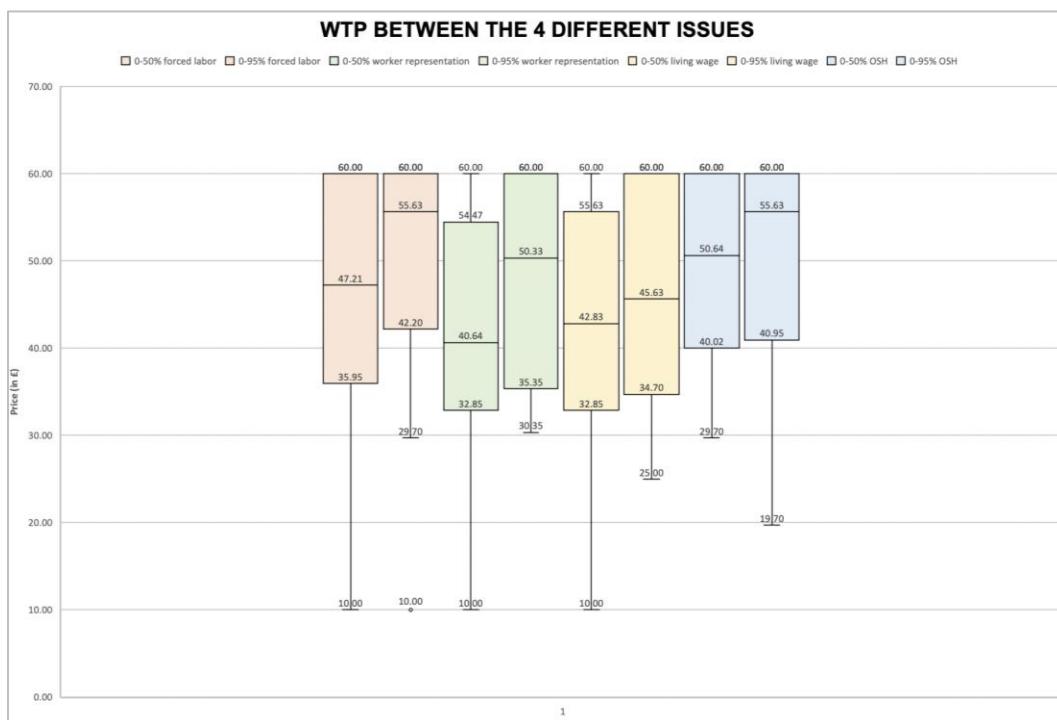
⁸ Willingness to pay (WTP) is an economic measurement of the maximum amount consumers are ready to spend for products with specific attributes—for example, the study found that participants were willing to pay a 22% premium for products with 95% forced labour-free compliance, demonstrating tangible financial value for human rights transparency.

Throughout the experiment, participants were presented with a series of choices between two comparable sets of light switches resembling the Unica product. In each choice task, the only differences between the two sets were the price and the level of guarantee related to compliance for each of the four human rights metrics.⁹ For each metric, the team defined three levels of guarantees:

- No official guarantees that any worker involved in the production of this set of switches...
- Official guarantees that at least 50% of workers involved in the production of this set of switches...
- Official guarantees that at least 95% of workers involved in the production of this set of switches [worked in a situation in which —insert human right metric—was ensured]

The behavioral experiment results clearly demonstrated a strong willingness to pay for the product which provides accurate human rights data to the end customers, across the four human rights metrics which were tested. The issues of OSH and forced labour both exhibited a greater willingness to pay compared to the two other issues, living wage and worker representation.

Excerpt from the behavioral study results. Graph representing the WTP of participants for each human rights issue tested, and for each level of guarantee. The baseline price for one set of four switches was €30. Therefore, the WTP is the price indicated in the graph minus €30.



⁹ Apart from the WTP choice questions, participants also answered follow-up questions, notably related to their socio-economic situation and general attitudes towards human rights. The study was inspired by [Hill, B., & Lloyd, T. \(2025\) Are people willing to pay for reduced inequality? *Management Science*, 71\(1\), 146-161.](#)

How to read the results? Each column in the graph shows how much participants are willing to pay for a product that guarantees partial (50%) or almost full (95%) compliance with a specific human rights issue.

- The number inside each box indicates the average amount consumers were willing to pay when that specific guarantee was included. If the number inside the box is £47.21, this means that on average, participants were willing to pay £17.21 more than the baseline price to ensure that specific human rights issue was addressed.
- The top of the box shows the highest amount declared by participants, if the top of the box is £60, it corresponds to a £30 premium above the base price.
- The bottom of the box represents a lower, but still common, value within the range of responses.
- The lines ("whiskers") extending below the boxes indicate lower-end responses, in some cases, participants were willing to pay very little or no additional amount (e.g., £10) for that guarantee.

Conclusion

Building on the work carried out during the seven months period of the clinic, the students were able to formulate a set of recommendations structured around five pillars: data management (1), supplier engagement (2), consumer engagement (3), cross-sector collaboration (4), and implementation (5). These recommendations were first presented orally during a workshop with all parties of the clinic. They were subsequently edited with comments from the corporate partner and summarized in a final report which was handed over as a final deliverable.

Challenges

The Clinic encountered several challenges:

1. Traceability Limitations: Schneider Electric, like many MNEs, faces significant challenges in tracing human rights compliance beyond tier 1 suppliers due to the complexity of its value chains.
2. Supplier Engagement Resistance: suppliers resist compliance due to cost concerns or lack of understanding, requiring extensive training and engagement efforts.
3. Data Collection Complexity: unlike environmental data, human rights data lacks standardized metrics, making collection particularly challenging in high-risk regions.
4. Geographical Variations: human rights risks vary significantly across regions, requiring tailored approaches.
5. Consumer Communication Gaps: limited traceability mechanisms hinder the ability to provide transparent communication on human rights performance.
6. Sensitive Nature of Human Rights Disclosures: Schneider Electric, its suppliers and distributors, may be uncomfortable communicating on these issues.

Despite these challenges, the HEC Business & Human Rights Research Clinic benefited all parties involved. It proved to be very helpful in offering a hands-on and collaborative experience for students. The clinic highlighted the relevance of multi-stakeholder collaboration in tackling complex issues such as human rights challenges within global value chains. For the academic mentors, it provided a fitting platform to work across faculty on a real case and disseminate existing research in a practical manner. For the corporate partner, the clinic offered a rare opportunity to receive external guidance on a complex topic involving diverse internal and external stakeholders.

The clinic is also a testament to the potential of business schools to drive meaningful change by bridging the gaps between research, theory and practice. Inspired by well-documented experiences from medical or legal education, clinics can give students enrolled in business and management programs the

opportunity to design innovative, evidence-based solutions to real-world problems while learning from both industry leaders and cutting-edge researchers.

Looking ahead, the work conducted in this Clinic lays the groundwork for broader adoption of human rights transparency across industries. It demonstrates that addressing human rights is not just a regulatory or ethical obligation but also an opportunity to create value for customers, investors, and society at large. By integrating social metrics into existing frameworks, fostering cross-industry collaboration, and engaging consumers with transparent communication, corporations such as Schneider Electric have the chance to lead a global movement towards more responsible business practices.

The students enrolled in this program summarize its ambition eloquently:

"This Clinic is more than a project; it is a model for how academia and business can work together to drive systemic change. It is our hope that this collaboration inspires other companies and institutions to take similar steps toward advancing human rights through innovative partnerships. Together, we can make meaningful progress in creating a more equitable and sustainable world."



Life Is On

Schneider
Electric

INSTITUT SUSTAINABILITY & ORGANIZATIONS
HEC PARIS
1, rue de la libération
78350 Jouy-en-Josas