

United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD)

Summaries of Presentations Made at the
UNRISD Conference on

Corporate Social Responsibility and Development: Towards a New Agenda?

17 November 2003–18 November 2003
Salle XVI, Palais des Nations, Geneva



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CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND DEVELOPMENT: TOWARDS A NEW AGENDA?

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Conference on

**Corporate Social Responsibility and
Development:
Towards a New Agenda?**

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Opening Speech

Thandika Mkandawire

Director, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), Switzerland

On behalf of UNRISD it gives me great pleasure to welcome you to this conference.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of UNRISD. In commemoration of this date we have just completed a report that analyses the contribution of UNRISD research to thinking and knowledge on social development issues. In preparing the report, it was apparent how the issues of concern to the international development community have changed. Back in the 1960s and 1970s we were particularly concerned about the role of the state in developing countries and why development projects often failed. In the 1980s and 1990s considerable attention was focused on the role of civil society organizations in development and issues of people's "participation". These issues remain highly pertinent but increasingly attention is being focused on the role of the private sector in social and sustainable development has emerged as an important concern.

Various factors account for this: both economic growth and foreign direct investment have proved elusive for many developing countries; the role of the state in development has come in for considerable criticism and been reassessed; the euphoria with NGOs has subsided; and during the 1980s and early 1990s it became clear that neoliberal policies were granting corporations considerable rights and benefits without commensurate responsibilities and obligations.

Development and finance agencies that form part of the bilateral and multilateral systems are now emphasizing so-called "good governance" and public-private partnerships in their policies and programmes. One of the concrete outcomes of this new approach has been far greater involvement of business in policy dialogues and in the design and implementation of development programmes and projects. And business is being called upon to act more responsibly in relation to social, labour, environment and human rights issues or to engage in what is often called "corporate social responsibility".

This is quite a different scenario to that which existed 10 or 20 years ago. Then the main concern was how to accelerate foreign direct investment by freeing up trade and investment regimes, with little consideration of social, environmental and human rights impacts. The current situation is also different in another respect. In the past corporate interaction with the public policy process or the public sector consisted, to a large extent, of joint ventures and behind the scenes lobbying.

In the build-up to the World Social Summit in 1995, we carried out a broad inquiry into the social effects of globalization, which documented the growing divide between corporate rights and obligations. It was then that we began to look into the impact of transnational corporations in developing countries and this relatively new CSR agenda. A second phase of our work on CSR began in 1997 when we looked in more depth at the so-called "greening of business" in developing countries, i.e. at what big business was doing to improve its environmental record, and why it was taking environmental issues more seriously.

In 2000 we received a generous grant from the MacArthur foundation to continue our work on CSR. Under this project we have broadened the scope of the inquiry to include social and



labour issues; we have also examined different types of regulatory arrangements, including corporate self-regulation and voluntary initiatives; so-called “civil regulation”, where regulatory pressures and norms emanate from civil society; and governmental and international regulation.

Research has been carried out in Brazil, India, Mexico, Peru, the Philippines and South Africa. Research was also carried out on specific issues such as UN-business partnerships and the Global Compact, the “corporate accountability movement” and international regulation of TNCs.

We will be presenting some of the results from this research at this conference, but we want the event to be far more than a dissemination outlet for UNRISD research. We have invited some leading researchers and writers on CSR and development issues to also share their perspectives. You will be hearing a range of views but, like UNRISD, many of the speakers share a number of concerns about the dominant CSR agenda and its developmental and regulatory implications. Joining them are several colleagues from other UN agencies that have been dealing with the private sector and CSR issues.

Peter Utting, who has been co-ordinating UNRISD’s work on CSR, will now expand on the issues and concerns that have motivated this conference.



CSR and Development: Is a New Agenda Needed?

Peter Utting

Deputy Director and CSR Research Co-ordinator, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), Switzerland

During the nine years that UNRISD has been conducting research on corporate social and environmental responsibility (hereafter referred to as CSR), it has been interesting to see how research questions and concerns have evolved. The early emphasis on the “credibility” of CSR has been complemented by questioning its development dimension and a search for regulatory alternatives.

The credibility question

The mainstream CSR agenda developed in the aftermath of the Earth Summit in 1992 when an expanding group of large global corporations promoted certain practices and a particular discourse that emphasized ethical behaviour towards different stakeholders and a range of voluntary initiatives. These included codes of conduct, improvements in working conditions and environmental management systems (EMS), community development projects, corporate giving, and company reporting on social and environmental aspects. During the mid-1990s, UNRISD, like many others, was interested in what could be called the credibility question surrounding CSR: were companies really practising what they preached, did this new discipline amount to more than PR and window-dressing, and was this agenda likely to take off? Internationally, CSR research was often divided into two camps: one exposing “greenwash”; the other exposing “best practice”. A lot of research and writing was also preoccupied with understanding what exactly was driving CSR.

Heated debates still persist but the answers to these questions now seem a bit clearer. There is more clarity regarding the social, economic and regulatory pressures and incentives that are moving the agenda forward, although there is still considerable disagreement regarding the relative importance of these different “drivers”.

Certainly CSR did gather momentum, with more and more companies, business associations, civil society organizations, and governmental and multilateral organizations associating themselves with this agenda. CSR has also become institutionalized with the growth of company CSR departments and codes of conduct; university courses dealing with CSR and business ethics; an expanding CSR industry of consultants, NGOs, multistakeholder initiatives and public-private partnerships; and new forms of governmental and international

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