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Partners in Time? Business, NGOs and Sustainable Development

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UNRISD Discussion Paper No. 109, August 1999

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ISSN 1012-6511

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◆ Summary / Résumé / Resumen

Summary

Historically, most relationships between the private sector and civil society have been founded upon conflict. In different sectors and geographical contexts, this pattern of business-NGO relations has recently started to change with the emergence of formal sustainable development partnerships between these long-standing adversaries.

Part 1 of this paper offers a global overview of the changing nature of business-NGO relations on sustainable development. It examines why and how such relations are changing in the 1990s, the current spectrum of business-NGO relations and how the strategic responses of business and NGOs to sustainable development have evolved. In order to illustrate how business-NGO relations in both the North and South are developing in practice, three case studies are presented on protest and partnership initiatives in the forest products, oil and sporting goods industries respectively.

The case study of the tropical timber trade highlights the myriad relations between civil society and business and the very different corporate responses to civil society and consumer pressures. It is suggested that these varied responses are partly explained by the fact that certain companies and individuals within senior management have taken a leadership role and have recognized both the ethical, commercial or competitive value of corporate environmental responsibility.

The analysis of Shell's experience in Nigeria reveals the impact which co-ordinated global protest can have on corporate activities. This case suggests that enhanced dialogue and partnership may not be enough to improve the global image of the oil industry. The big oil companies confront serious limits in their ability to change fundamentally the environmentally damaging nature of their business and, in general, have failed to recognize the need for energy alternatives.

The case study of the attempt to eliminate the use of child labour in the manufacture of soccer balls in Pakistan outlines the politics and processes of complex multi-stakeholder North-South partnerships to promote corporate social responsibility. An important lesson from this case is the fundamental importance of corporate transparency and a willingness to accept independent monitoring. The study reveals the tensions inherent in such projects. Serious questions remain concerning the future of children whose employment is affected, the effects of such projects on exports, and the sustainability and replicability of complex multi-stakeholder projects.

The case studies are followed by a review of various typologies of business-NGO relations in the literature on conflict and partnership. None, it is argued, explains adequately the diversity of such relations and their implications for governance and global social change. Part 1 concludes with preliminary thoughts on the preconditions, interactive processes and outcomes of more collaborative relations between business and NGOs.

Part 2 presents a theory to explain the expanding role of NGOs in the promotion of corporate responsibility for sustainable development. It considers the potential for the wider replication of NGO-driven corporate environmentalism in developing

countries. This is done by placing the initiatives described in Part 1 within the context of global processes, including the globalization of business, trade and finance, advances in communications technologies and new governance challenges. This leads to the development of a theory of how corporations are regulated for social and environmental goals in a globalizing economy.

It is argued that growing business responsibility for the environment is not only a rational business response to so-called “win-win” opportunities. Neither is it simply a public relations exercise, as some critics contend. Rather, companies are responding to various forms of pressure and influence from civil society organizations and movements. In other words, what is referred to in this paper as *civil regulation* is an increasingly important driver of corporate environmental and social responsibility.

Key points to emerge from this analysis include the following:

- Corporate environmentalism is a political phenomenon.
- Through the politics of both pressure and engagement, NGOs are creating the new agenda for business as much as companies are themselves.
- The political power of NGOs is not a passing fad but an expression of a new form of consumer politics, which is the result of social, economic and cultural change.
- By describing a continuum of protest and partnership relations between business and NGOs we can observe a new form of regulation for global business, called civil regulation.
- Civil regulation organizations, such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), will probably be replicated in other industrial sectors and come to be known as systems of global private regulation.
- These developments rely on the sensitivities of Northern markets, and may not be transferable to countries or regions where consumer-driven market pressure is not as prevalent.
- For the civil regulation agenda to develop in the South, and for Northern NGOs to maintain legitimacy when promoting corporate responsibility in developing countries, there must be stronger alliances between Northern and Southern NGOs.
- Changes in the global economy mean that governments need to assume a greater role as leaders and facilitators, but they are in danger of negotiating that role away through global trade and investment agreements.
- The uncertainty that surrounds the issue of corporate environmentalism suggests the need for greater international collaboration in this area.

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Résumé

Historiquement, la plupart des relations entre le secteur privé et la société civile sont conflictuelles. Dans différents secteurs et contextes géographiques, ce type de relations entreprises-ONG a commencé à changer récemment avec l'émergence de partenariats officiels de développement durable entre ces protagonistes longtemps adversaires.

La première partie de ce document donne une vue d'ensemble du changement qui est en train de s'opérer dans les relations entre entreprises et ONG sur le développement durable. Les auteurs étudient pourquoi et comment ces relations se transforment dans les années 1990, examinent le spectre actuel des relations entreprises-ONG et s'interrogent sur la manière dont a évolué l'attitude stratégique des entreprises et des ONG à l'égard du développement durable. Pour illustrer comment les relations entreprises-ONG ont évolué au Nord et au Sud, ils présentent trois études de cas, consacrées à des initiatives de contestation et de partenariat dans les domaines des produits forestiers, du pétrole et des articles de sport respectivement.

L'étude du commerce des bois tropicaux met en lumière la myriade des relations entre la société civile et les entreprises et les réactions extrêmement différentes de ces dernières aux pressions de la société civile et des consommateurs. Selon les auteurs, la diversité de ces réactions s'expliquerait en partie par le fait que certaines sociétés et certains cadres supérieurs ont compris avant les autres la valeur éthique et l'intérêt commercial ou compétitif d'un comportement écologiquement responsable.

L'analyse de l'expérience de Shell au Nigéria révèle l'impact que peut avoir une contestation mondiale concertée sur les activités d'une entreprise. Ce cas laisse à penser qu'une plus grande ouverture au dialogue et au partenariat peut ne pas suffire à améliorer l'image de marque de l'industrie pétrolière dans le monde. L'aptitude des grandes sociétés pétrolières à changer radicalement la nature polluante de leurs activités est très limitée et, de manière générale, elles refusent de reconnaître la nécessité d'énergies de substitution.

L'étude sur la tentative d'élimination du travail des enfants dans la confection des ballons de football au Pakistan fait ressortir les aspects politiques d'associations complexes formées entre des protagonistes multiples du Nord et du Sud pour inciter des entreprises à assumer leurs responsabilités sociales, ainsi que les aléas de telles relations. S'il est un enseignement à tirer de cette étude, c'est bien l'importance fondamentale de la transparence pour les entreprises et la nécessité pour elles d'accepter le contrôle d'un organisme indépendant. L'étude révèle les tensions inhérentes à ce genre de projets. De graves questions demeurent en suspens: l'avenir des enfants dont l'emploi est touché, les effets de ces projets sur les exportations et la viabilité et la reproductibilité de projets complexes réunissant de nombreux participants.

Les études de cas sont suivies d'une analyse des divers types de relations entreprises-ONG décrits dans la littérature du conflit et du partenariat. Selon les auteurs, aucun de ces types ne suffit à expliquer la diversité de ces relations et leurs incidences sur la gestion des affaires et le changement social à l'échelle mondiale. La première partie s'achève sur des réflexions préliminaires sur les

conditions et les effets d'une attitude plus coopérative entre entreprises et ONG et sur les facteurs intervenant dans leurs relations.

La deuxième partie expose une théorie destinée à expliquer la part de plus en plus grande que prennent les ONG à l'action menée pour inciter les entreprises à assumer leurs responsabilités en matière de développement durable. Les auteurs examinent les possibilités qui s'offrent de voir les ONG pousser les entreprises à se montrer plus respectueuses de l'environnement dans les pays en développement. Ils le font en replaçant les initiatives décrites dans la première partie dans le contexte des grands courants mondiaux, notamment celui de la mondialisation des affaires, du commerce et des finances, des progrès des techniques de communication et des nouveaux défis lancés aux dirigeants. Cela les amène à élaborer une théorie sur la manière dont les sociétés se régulent en fonction d'objectifs sociaux et écologiques dans une économie en voie de mondialisation.

Les auteurs expliquent qu'en adoptant un comportement écologiquement plus responsable les entreprises n'agissent pas seulement de manière rationnelle dans une situation où toutes les parties en présence ont à gagner. Elles ne se livrent pas non plus simplement à un exercice de relations publiques, comme l'affirment certains détracteurs. Ce serait plutôt leur façon de réagir à diverses pressions et influences exercées par des mouvements et des organisations de la société civile. En d'autres termes, ce qu'on appelle dans ce document la "régulation civile" est une incitation de plus en plus puissante à adopter un comportement écologiquement et socialement responsable.

Voici les principales conclusions qui se dégagent de cette analyse:

- Le souci de l'environnement dans les entreprises est un phénomène politique.
- En alliant pressions et engagement, les ONG infléchissent le comportement des entreprises autant que celles-ci le déterminent elles-mêmes.
- Le pouvoir politique des ONG n'est pas une mode passagère mais la manifestation de la force nouvelle que représentent les consommateurs et qui résulte de changements sociaux, économiques et culturels.
- En décrivant tout le spectre des relations entre entreprises et ONG—qui va de la contestation au partenariat—on peut observer une nouvelle forme de régulation à laquelle se soumet le monde des entreprises, appelée régulation civile.
- Des organisations telles que le Forest Stewardship Council (FSC—Conseil pour l'intendance des forêts) et le Marine Stewardship Council (MSC—Conseil

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