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Business Responsibility for Environmental Protection in Developing Countries

Report of the International Workshop
Heredia, Costa Rica, 22–24 September 1997
UNRISD Conference Report, May 1988

PREFACE

During the 1990s there have been some significant changes in the way business corporations use and manage natural resources. The so-called "greening of business" has gathered momentum particularly in the industrialized North; but in developing countries as well an increasing number of companies are adopting environmental management policies and practices that attempt to use natural resources more efficiently, minimize externalities and rehabilitate the environment.

Corporations that are taking a proactive role in the field of environmental protection are also becoming increasingly influential in shaping national policy on environmental issues, as well as international standards and regulatory processes that are currently under negotiation. In certain countries, some of the most significant developments in government environmental policy have occurred when influential business interests have added their weight to the conservation lobby. As corporate responsibility for environmental protection increases, state agencies in several countries are ceding control of certain areas of resource management or protection to the private sector and reducing levels of public-sector regulation in favour of voluntary agreements or self-regulation by business.

There is considerable debate, however, about whether such trends associated with "corporate environmentalism" are contributing in any meaningful way to sustainable development. There can be little doubt that a growing number of companies are now adopting codes of conduct and environmental reporting and monitoring procedures; promoting recycling, waste or pollution control and energy efficiency; and taking more proactive measures to conserve the environment. Yet many commentators dismiss these developments as extremely piecemeal, mere window dressing or as actually having resulted in negative environmental and social effects. There is a strong body of opinion which claims that the harshly competitive macro-economic environment of the 1990s creates a context that is hostile, rather than conducive, to corporate environmentalism and that this climate is eroding any gains that have been made. Furthermore, there is concern regarding the apparent transfer of responsibility for regulation from public to private institutions and the notion that "policing the polluter" should be left to the polluter.

The debate on corporate environmentalism concerns not only the reality behind corporate claims to manage natural resources on a sustainable basis but also the question of which sectors of the business community are acting responsibly in environmental and social terms. While much criticism has been directed at transnational corporations, TNCs themselves and other commentators often claim that it is national rather than transnational enterprises that either do more damage to the environment or have taken fewer initiatives to reform environmental management systems. Furthermore, there appear to be some major differences in levels of corporate responsibility by industrial sector.

It is extremely difficult to assess what impact corporate environmentalism has had in terms of promoting sustainable development in developing countries. This is partly due to the fact that opinions and analyses on the scale and effects of these trends tend to be fairly anecdotal and polarized, and that research is often influenced by business interests, consumers' associations or NGOs, each with their own agenda. Moreover, much of the analysis focuses narrowly on environmental objectives and technical solutions and ignores important social and political aspects. In view of this situation, the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) launched in 1997 a programme of research and policy dialogue on **Business Responsibility for Sustainable Development**, which aims to promote independent research and international debate on the role of big business in environmental protection and social development in developing countries.

Under the first phase of this programme, UNRISD and the Universidad Nacional (UNA) in Costa Rica organized a three-day international workshop on **Business Responsibility for Environmental Protection in Developing Countries**. The papers prepared for the meeting and the discussions themselves were organized in five main sessions. The first provided an opportunity to consider very different perspectives on the potential and limits of corporate environmentalism. Session two explored the types of public policies, partnerships and political conditions conducive to corporate environmental responsibility. The third session assessed the experience of corporate environmentalism in selected developing countries. Session four examined in more detail the case of Costa Rica. The final session discussed key issues and proposals for future research, policy dialogue and networking.

This report of the workshop is divided into six parts. The first part summarizes both in English and Spanish some of the main issues and ideas discussed during the three days. Two of the opening addresses and abstracts or summaries of the workshop papers are then presented. These are followed by the workshop agenda and list of participants. Additional information on some of the workshop participants is presented in the final section.

The UNRISD project on **Business Responsibility for Sustainable Development** is co-ordinated by Peter Utting.

May 1998

Thandika Mkandawire
Director, UNRISD

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

BECC	Border Environmental Consultative Commission
CAMBIOS	Programa Cambio Social, Biodiversidad, Sostenibilidad
CEC	Commission on Environmental Cooperation
CEGESTI	Centro de Gestión Technológica
CEM	corporate environmental management
CINPE	Centro Internacional de Política Económica para el Desarrollo Sostenible/International Center of Economic Policy for Sustainable Development
EHS	environment, health and safety
EMAS	Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (of the European Union)
G-7/G-8	Group of Seven/Group of Eight
INBio	Instituto Nacional de Biodiversidad/National Biodiversity Institute
INCAE	Instituto Centroamericano de Administración de Empresas
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NGO	non-governmental organization
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
SINAC	Sistema Nacional de Areas de Conservación/National System of Conservation Areas
TNC	transnational corporation
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
WBCSD	World Business Council for Sustainable Development
WTO	World Trade Organization

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