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Thematic Section

On Civil Governance

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ABSTRACT *In his discussion of how corporate responsibility will impact on tomorrow's global markets, Simon Zadek argues that corporate responsibility needs to make a real difference to the lives of poor people and the security of the natural environment. He outlines two scenarios for the year 2020. The first scenario, Grey Dawn, is broadly negative and undesirable, while the second, Civil Governance, presents positively how civil society and business relations with the UN could evolve in the future.*

KEYWORDS *World Summit on Sustainable Development; business; development; partnership; the Global Compact; UN*

Can corporations be civil?

In August 2002, some 60,000 people packed their bags to join in the World Summit on Sustainable Development.[2] Johannesburg and its antecedents in Monterrey, Beijing, Copenhagen and Rio,[3] just to name a few, have all played crucial roles in driving forward progressive agendas. Beyond the events' themes, such summits generate change by ushering in new players and processes into the development process. Such Summits validate new players and processes by re-framing the challenge, re-assessing lessons from the past, and offering visions of how things can be different in the future.

The Johannesburg Summit was more than anything about the role of business in development. Just as Rio was as much about legitimizing the role of NGOs in global governance as it was about the environment, Johannesburg was about the legitimacy of the role of business in development, working with public bodies and civil society organizations. Partnerships were simultaneously the Summit's silver bullet and *bete noir*. But the outcome, for better or worse (or both) was to usher in an era of 'partnerships for development', underpinned variously by missionary zeal, market-related, fiscal or statutory reasons.

But the die had already been cast, and the Summit was simply a confirmation. It was in reality two years earlier on 26 July 2000 in New York when the roles of non-state actors in global governance were irrevocably changed.[4] On that day, the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, flanked by the world's most senior global civil servants,[5] hosted the inauguration of the Global Compact.[6] The name plaques announcing those in attendance highlighted the significance of the moment. Arrayed around one of the UN's semi-circular chambers in New York were a powerful blend of business, NGOs and labour organizations – the architects of tomorrow's world. Present were the most well-known corporate giants, including BP, the Ford Motor Corporation, Rio Tinto and Shell and Unilever; some of the newly emerging corporate Titans, such as the Brazilian communications corporation, Globo, the Indian conglomerate, Tata, and the South African utilities company, Eskom. Also in attendance were both traditional and new-found partners; including the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, Human Rights Watch and the World Wide Fund for Nature. For the record, lining the back of the chamber in unmarked seats were representatives of many nation states, somewhat uncomfortable spectators of what was to come.

The Global Compact is one of a growing number of recently established partnerships that are seeking to redefine the terms on which non-state actors join with the UN and other public bodies in seeking to deliver public goods more effectively. These partnerships, while diverse in scope and form, in the main share two core aims:

- to harness the competencies of business and civil society in pursuit of local and global public goods and
- to establish new governance arrangements over the growing political and economic power of non-state actors.

These two objectives are clearly uncomfortable bedfellows. Yet they are the hallmark of today's governance challenge – where increased expectations of what responsibilities business and civil society can and should shoulder go hand in hand with a growing and visible unease about the manifest inadequacy of existing governance systems to accommodate these changing roles.

It is easy to criticize corporate responsibility by pointing to examples of green and blue wash, and to reveal the real power imbalances between different 'partners in development'.[7] But it is important also to recognize that these critics are counter-balanced by those who welcome the engagement of business in the development agenda, including some of the today's more progressive global players. Brazil's recent publication of its statutory framework for public–private partnerships signals their core role in Lula de Silva's development strategy, and Nelson Mandela's ever-closer relationship with the international business community in furthering his campaign against HIV/AIDS. Kofi Annan has been very clear on this issue:

> When I speak about civil society, I don't mean only non-governmental organizations, though they are a very important part of it. I also mean universities, foundations, labour unions and – yes – private corporations.

Coming of age

Today, corporate responsibility is coming of age. We are no longer satisfied with 'interesting experiments'.[8] We want results. Investors want to see translations into material business benefits, and civil society organizations want to see real shifts in businesses' accountability to their stakeholders. Most of all, we want to see corporate responsibility making a real difference to the lives of poor people and the security of the natural environment. Without this final piece, even if low-level responsibility turns out to be good for business and some of its stakeholders, corporate responsibility has no meaningful future.

Back in 1999, I outlined three possible future pathways for corporate responsibility:[9]

- *Oasis:* A significant, but small group of companies, together with some NGOs and governments, would take up the challenge of aligning their business strategy and operations to the imperatives of, and opportunities associated with, sustainable development. However, the bulk of the business community, and many parts of civil society, would not be able to, or chose not to, engage.
- *Desert:* Over time the desert will encroach on the oasis that has been created. This encroachment could happen for many reasons, including short termism in the financial community and public cynicism. The results would be that responsible corporate behaviour would be neither recognized nor rewarded, leading to an erosion of the 'win-win' area linking business benefit and wider societal outcomes.
- *Mecca:* Mecca would not be an end point but a pathway of positive change. Leading companies

achieve competitive advantage by evolving innovative and effective business strategies that deliver greater social and environmental accountability. Public policy, including regulation, is effective in encouraging others to follow in the steps of corporate innovators rather than adopting business strategies that could undermine the gains achieved through the latter's activities across the economic, social and environmental spheres.

The more profound agenda is, then, how the space we call 'corporate responsibility' would impact on whether and how tomorrow's global markets will be moulded along the contours of responsible or irresponsible business practices.

Today, we see evidence of all three pathways combating with each other across companies, sectors, and countries. Some commentators, notably Martin Wolf of the Financial Times and David Henderson of the Institute of Economic Affairs, argue that corporate responsibility will lead companies into an ultimately fatal quagmire, the Desert or at best the Oasis end game. Those pointing towards Mecca point out that corporate responsibility is fast becoming something of an experimental laboratory for public policy, whether you look at the Khazakstani Government's work on transparency in the extractive industry, French regulations on sustainability reporting, the Brazilian Government's consideration of embedding corporate responsibility into their framework for public–private partnerships, to bilateral trade agreements such as that between the USA and Cambodia embodying conditions on labour standards.

Imagining tomorrow's history

So how can we tell if corporate responsibility is part of the problem, part of the solution, or more likely either depending on how we act today in creating tomorrow's history? AccountAbility recently completed a piece of work for the UN that considered the particular connection between the future role of civil society organizations in the UN and the phenomenon of 'partnerships'.[10] The approach taken was to set out two scenarios of how the links between partnerships and UN relations with civil society might be viewed from someone looking back from the year 2020. The first scenario, Grey Dawn, was broadly negative and undesirable, while the second, Civil Governance, contained some of the possible strands of how we might wish civil society and business relations with the UN to evolve in the future.

These scenarios were not meant to provide answers, nor to offer predictions or proposals. Rather, their function was to challenge the assumptions that guide our thinking and actions on this matter, and so allow us to reflect more openly on the available challenges and options. Although focused on civil society and the UN, the scenarios, summarized below, raised larger questions about the place of non-state actors, including business, in the future governance of our communities and societies, and indeed their relationship to global governance.

Scenario 1: Grey Dawn

Looking back from 2020,[11] the last two decades have been marked by the establishment of public–private partnerships as the development vehicle preferred by state and most non-state actors. Thousands were created in the first years following the Summit, rapidly becoming the entry-condition for accessing public funds for development. UN agencies were rewarded in the form of member state funding, media, and internal recognition for the volume of partnerships. Competition for engagement with top companies became fierce with firms becoming overwhelmed by the multiple uncoordinated overtures from what they thought was only one international organization, rather than a system of numerous agencies.

Achieving scale meant bigger, not only more. Ever-larger and more ambitious partnerships were created, involving the world's largest corporations joined at the hip with under-resourced governments, multilaterals and civil society partners. Global partnerships became complex, multi-billion dollar enterprises with staff and offices sprawling across the continents. Partnerships increasingly became contract-based commercial arrangements, exporting the experience in Europe (Nelson and Zadek, 2000) and elsewhere of delivering public service through public–private partnerships funded through long-term guarantees of public sector financial subventions (IPPR, 2001).

Most partnerships, particularly the larger ones, suffered the same fate as their public sector predecessors. Personal, political and commercial interests replaced earlier innovation based on social entrepreneurship. Cultures of low performance set in, driven by the high transaction costs and long start up times endemic to partnerships, a lack of focus and, increasingly, straightforward corruption. Public demand for greater accountability shifted their focus from business to partnerships, and from partnerships to their constituent partners, notably public bodies and civil society organizations. Calls for greater statutory regulation moved beyond business transparency and foreign direct liability as the first cycle of lawsuits emerged targeted at partnerships over their alleged misdemeanours. Partnerships began to appear as contingent liabilities rather than assets on company balance sheets as the risks increasingly outweighed the potential financial gains.[12]

By now, 2020, despondency has set in on the part of those who advocated partnerships, and frustration and anger by those who were more sceptical from the outset. The partnership approach has suffered the same ignominious fate as its antecedent, easy-win 'silver bullets' for development, nationalization in the 1960s, and privatization in the 1990s. We are once again facing the question of how best we can organize and finance effective development.

But history cannot be reversed. Our infatuation with partnerships over the years following the Johannesburg Summit impacted profoundly on the governance of our public institutions. The gap between *de jura* (what it says in the book) and *de facto* (reality on the ground) governance has never been greater. The UN General Assembly still exists but its relevance has steadily declined, symbolized by its lack of visibility to all but the many officials that service their endless debates and their, largely unheard and un-enforced, resolutions. Real decisions that direct the will of leaders and the world's resources happen elsewhere, across the higher-level partnerships, Global Policy Networks (GPNs). These GPNs emerged during the decades following the Summit to cope with topics as diverse as HIV/AIDS and conflict diamonds, water resource rights and emission trading.

The upsurge in civil society engagement in such GPNs did not, deliver the expected democratic dividend. The very idea of 'civil society organizations' has become a misnomer through their steady corporatization. Their growing leverage through access to the UN and other bodies in practice de-linked them from their much-proclaimed constituencies, and made them dependent on business and politically vested funders, leaving an air of sameness around the Board tables of most multi-stakeholder processes and institutions. Civil society's increasing involvement in such partnerships left them open to challenge. From the Republican right came attacks building on the early work of the American Enterprise Institute. From the progressive end of the scale came the more considered calls for NGOs to consider their position (Zadek, 2003a). But repeated attempts over two decades to reinvigorate the basis on which NGOs could be held to account have failed, because NGOs simply would not accept the need for a maturing of their basis of accountability to their constituencies.[13]

There is a similar situation for the UN. Two decades of intensive partnering has had its toll on its claims to independence as it has become embedded within networks of public and private institutions delivering complex blends of public and private goods. Its 'terms of engagement' in partnerships were constantly revised, but somehow never really grappled with the realities of the impact of its engagement with business and civil society on its operations, governance and legitimacy. Kofi Annan was the last Secretary General to represent the spirit of the UN's founders as his successors found themselves running an increasingly comprised institution in hoc to both political and business interests through their newly embedded relationships with business and special-interest non-profit organizations.

Scenario 2: Civil governance

Looking back from 2020, and contrary to the expectations of many, the decades following the Johannesburg Summit demonstrated our collective ability to confound the doomsayers, and evolve significant social innovations to address our changing environment and needs.

Seeking to cope with a growing resource deficit, the UN accelerated its engagement with better resourced and networked business, public bodies and civil society organizations. Such partnerships were envisaged as complementing the UN's core development expertise. But it soon became clear that such non-state actors were able to internalize such expertise, so reducing their need for any UN operational involvement.

The UN was in a sense returning to its roots. Rather than seeking to manage a sprawling global empire of thematic programmes, it began to focus again on its unique ability to convene the world's governing institutions to deliberate on, develop and enforce a framework of universally accepted values.

But the growing importance of partnerships created a governance challenge quite unlike the UN's older style projects and programmes. Partnerships involved institutions with attitudes and influence, and the ability to withdraw support. Many of the UN's new-found partners were not content to work within the confines of one partnership, but increasingly demanded a greater say in how the UN itself made decisions.

The upturn of this development was the UN Governance Convention of 2009, which set out the basis on which non-state actors could be incorporated into the UN's governance.[14] Now is not the time to recall the tortuous negotiation process and the host of subsidiary clauses that continue to make it difficult to effectively implement this crucial part of the deal. But the basics were as follows. The Convention, building on important early work at the now-defunct World Social Forum,[15] established a second UN Chamber, aptly named the Civil Chamber.

The Chamber was intended as, and remains, essentially a powerful dialogue partner to the General Assembly. It provides focused debate, and can table amendments to, and resist for a period of time the will of the General Assembly. It thereby plays a powerful 'ombudsman' role in the UN at the highest level, challenging and bringing into international debate aspects of sovereign state policy and practice. Since its establishment, the Civil Chamber has of course been testing the boundaries of its mandate, and it seems likely going forward that its executive power is likely to grow.

The Civil Chamber is currently made up of 832 elected organizational members, including NGOs, religious and labour organizations, and businesses. At one stage it looked as if there would be fixed numbers for each organizational category. But by then the distinctions were not clearcut, and so the Civil Governance Code was agreed in Ulaan Baatar in 2011. This Code established eligibility to the UN's Civil Chamber based on how an organization was governed, rather than its functions or activities. Core was the requirement that an organization establish a Civil Council to oversee strategy elected by a (non-paying) membership made up of impacted stakeholders.[16]

The Code was quickly adopted by a first rash of organizations wishing to make themselves eligible for the Civil Chamber. The unexpected level of take-up by businesses was helped, undoubtedly, by tempting tax incentives hitherto unavailable to commercial organizations. More surprisingly was the subsequent acceleration in take-up by many organizations, previously uninterested, in being nominated to the Chamber. This followed the publication of a study by the UN/World Bank's joint Civil Governance Unit, which observed that organizations operating under Civil Councils performed materially better then previously, and also better than others operating with traditional governance frameworks (UN/World Bank, 2011).

The Civil Chamber emerged from the recognition of the legitimacy of other routes along which the voices of people should be heard. This recognition was grounded in experiences of building and running operational and global policy partnerships. But just as the early partnership experience was shifting the UN's approach to its own governance, it was also feeding back to impact on partnerships themselves.

As the numbers and scale of partnerships increased following the Johannesburg Summit, the terms on which they operated became increasingly subject to legally binding contract, and therefore also to the courts. What had started as open development partnerships became closed to stakeholders, often even to the very basics of civil inspection. With growing proportions of both public funds and private investments being channelled through such partnerships, there was growing concern as these developments.

The tipping point came in 2006, when a rash of court cases were initiated by Chinese human rights lawyers on behalf of community groups in Germany who had been denied access to water under the control of a public–private partnership. The success of the legal action, and the subsequent bankruptcy of several of the partnering business and civil organizations, created panic amongst the now hundreds of thousands of commercial and non-profit organizations involved in comparable partnerships. A high-level Roundtable of some of the world's leading partnerships was hastily called which, dominated by lawyers, called for legislation to establish a new legal form limiting partner liability.

The UN, by now dependent on partnerships for its arms and legs, stepped in, and brokered a deal which became known as the Global Partnership Convention. Under this Convention, a new, international legal status was created for partnerships giving them (and partners) limited liability. Mirroring the recently completed debates about the UN's Civil Chamber, it was agreed that this status would only be available to these partnerships that conformed to a three-pronged model of governance.

- That the partnership adopted the Compact's eleven UN Principles as a legal element of its own constituency.
- That the partnership conformed to a series of accountability measures covering transparency and access to its governance process for its own stakeholders, and in particular committed to a civil reporting standard (ACCESS, 2006).
- That the partnerships Boards incorporated at least one, certified non-executive Director, whose task it would be to publicly report, annually, on the partnership's adherence to the terms of its protected status.

A new institution was created under the UN that provided regulatory oversight to this new agreement, which included establishing and monitoring the basis on which non-executive Directors were trained and certified, who by the time of writing this in 2020 numbered over 140,000 people.

Predictions in the early years of this millennium of the demise of the UN have therefore proved utterly wrong. Three extraordinary social innovations, the UN Civil Chamber, the related Civil Governance Code, and the Global Partnership Convention, have together reinvigorated the UN's legitimacy and effectiveness. One more thing. Of course we should have realized that these innovations would migrate towards each other, creating yet further, unexpected developments in global governance. Partnerships adhering to the terms of the Convention quickly realized that they in fact complied with the terms of the Civil Governance Code, making them eligible for nomination to the Civil Chamber. They made very presentable candidates, being able to demonstrate more than others their multi-dimensional constituencies. Following the most recent elections in 2018, almost one third of the Chamber's members are in fact partnerships, and there is every sign that this will grow further in the future. As the Civil Chamber approaches its tenth birthday, we are seeing the ascendance of civil partnerships in the governance of the UN, and more broadly our global community.

From responsibility to governance

But of course this is 2004, not 2020. None of this has really happened, although it might. The history of business in society, and its relationship to governance is waiting to be invented. The scenarios help us to illuminate what seem noteworthy features of the emerging relationship between corporate responsibility, partnerships and what I shall call 'civil governance'.

Understanding these relationships, and their significance, requires first a particular appreciation of context. Globalization involves two very different forces, and we seem to overly focus on just one, its homogenizing and 'concentrating' effects. The 'shadow' impact of globalization, however, are its fragmenting effects, and it is the tension between the two that we need to understand and work with. Corporate responsibility, for example, arises *both* because of the increased power of large businesses (the concentrating part of the equation) and because of the growing sense of unease that we are no longer clear as to who should or even does govern what, and how is or should be responsible for what (the fragmenting effects). Similarly, there is a growing concentration of legislative power, particularly in the form of the US, Europe and a few institutions like the WTO. But at the same time, there is a clear regulatory vacuum or at best mismatch at the international level given the nature of global markets, its main players and associated impacts.

From this context has emerged corporate responsibility, catalysed and sustained by two primary drivers. First, are the changing sources of economic value, and the complexity, volatility and risks associated with managing these 'new intangibles'. Second is the emergence of 'civil regulation', the ability and willingness of society to create collective pressure on business beyond the rule of law by threatening the productivity of these new intangibles. Beyond these two, inter-related, primary drivers, are the shifting contours of 'stakeholder responsibility'. This is not just a matter of business responding to a new set of stable demands. Stakeholders' sense of what is responsible is also in flux, volatile, inter-connected and responding often in confused or indeed pathologically ways to their context.

Corporate responsibility is most usefully understood not merely as what one or other company chooses to do, but a systemic expression of the context and drivers described above. The reason why companies move up through what I have described elsewhere as 'generations' of corporate responsibility (e.g. defensive, compliance, business integration, etc.) is precisely because the systemic dilemmas cannot be resolved by the lower-end responses. The stakes are rising because of the messy relationship between market and systemic functions.

This explains the advent of partnerships we have described in the scenarios. Businesses see the need to stabilize and regularize their context. They need to understand it, influence it, manage it, or better still, create it. Simplest is to buy the skills and relationships they need to do this, such as financial auditors, systems and management accounts. But this is not always possible. Companies need partnerships because some 'competencies' needed to run a successful business are not (yet) commoditized. A company like Shell or Nike needs to understand human and labour rights, but also to manage it as a performance imperative. Attempts to purchase this broader sense of competencies can and does lead to its deterioration. Legitimacy has a short shelf-life in the hands of those who are not deemed fit in this sense. Partnerships with civil organizations in such contexts emerge as a manifestation of mutual inter-dependence that cannot be resolved purely through the market.

The push for partnerships is therefore also a systemic manifestation, reflecting the shifting pattern of relationships being formed in an effort to effectively manage the context's tension between concentration and fragmentation in the face of primary and other drivers. Scaling-up therefore reflects entirely predictable attempts to stabilize an unruly system, as much as it does the ethics or morals of any particular agents, like us. We see this in the generational evolution of partnerships themselves. From the early days of operational multi-sectoral or 'collaborative' partnerships, we see a new generation that are more strategic. These partnerships seek to set rules that are 'stable, enforceable, and applied beyond the rule-makers themselves', such as the UN Global Compact, the Forest Stewardship Council, the Global Reporting Initiative, or the organization I work for, AccountAbility.

These partnerships are, consciously or (often) otherwise, collectively establishing a new 'civil governance'. Civil governance moves us beyond our normal understanding of governance. The rules are often evolved through *de facto* not *de jure* processes, only later moving from the first to the second rules. They are localized, not necessarily geographically, but by topic, sector, or time. They are in the main only partially enforceable, depending on the peer pressure, civil legitimacy and market dynamics rather than bureaucratic authority backed by the rights of governments to impose penalties.

Conclusion

Corporate responsibility is an expression of system dynamics, not only a fact arising from individual choice. Understanding this is essentially theoretical in the best sense of providing real insights for practical policy and action. Arising from this, secondly, is that corporate responsibility has an inexorable tendency to move 'upstream' in an effort, virus like, to extend its remedial impact on the system. This is why we can usefully understand corporate responsibility, partnerships and civil governance, as a continuum, rather than distinct phenomena. Thirdly, civil governance can best be seen as a massive experiment. This unintended and unregulated experiment is an evolving governance framework that mediates between the strengths and inadequacies of the 20th century's disappointments in state and market-based governance. In this sense, corporate responsibility is a space for transition, and the well-trodden law of unintended consequences tells us that there is no way of predicting in any automated sense what will be the outcomes.

Finally, we can see from this way of looking at things that corporate responsibility is only a piece of the puzzle. The accountability of civil society organizations and governments, and their relationships through partnerships, are all up for grabs in this period of change. Indeed, it is not helpful to think about corporate responsibility while leaving out the other bits. Again, this is not so much a matter of ethics or balance. It is that the whole spectrum of accountability dynamics have to part of any effective solution in addressing the challenge of taming globalization to the interests of the many; that is, the system itself.

Notes

1 Simon Zadek is Chief Executive of AccountAbility.
2 Drawn from S. Zadek (2003b).
3 The International Conference on Financing for Development in Monterrey, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen and the Conference on Environment and Development in Rio.
4 This section is drawn from S. Zadek (2002).
5 The heads of the ILO, UNDP, UNEP, and the UNHRC.
6 An initiative involving the business community, and civil society and labour organizations to further the realization of the core UN conventions and declarations covering labour standards, human rights and the environment; www.unglobalcompact.org.
7 For example, see P. Utting (2000) and A. Zammit (2003).
8 Parts of this section have been adapted from J. Sabapathy and S. Zadek (2004).
9 First published in S. Zadek (2000).
10 This section has been adapted from a Background Paper for the Secretary-General's Panel of Eminent Persons on Civil Society and UN Relationships; S. Zadek (2004).
11 This might be looked at together with other back-casting pieces, such as S. Zadek (1999).
12 Various contracts in the water and sanitation sector, for example, have been a source of some anxiety for a number of multinational companies, largely associated with mounting losses linked to foreign exchange losses.
13 See, for example, M. Edwards (2000).
14 UN (2009) Treatise for the Establishment of a Second UN Assembly ('Civil Chamber'), UN, San Jose.
15 Mike Edwards and Simon Zadek suggested a second UN chamber in M. Edwards and S. Zadek (2000). George Monbiot made a related suggestion in setting out how a World Parliament might work in G. Monbiot (2003).
16 There are, of course, more detailed criteria underlying this arrangement, notably that the right to vote was linked to the length of time that one had been an active member, and that the Council 'seats' were divided into different constituencies.

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