

***Re-envisioning the Roles of Global Actors:
An analysis of the UN Global Compact***

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ABSTRACT

The role of multinational corporations (MNCs) in countries of the South has increasingly been placed under a critical spotlight by not only opponents of globalization, but by civil society organizations at large. The activities of MNCs and their role in the development/maldevelopment of the South have been questioned in the framework of the need for accountability of such multilateral actors who have escalating levels of power and mobility in a global playground accruing much of the costs of globalization to the South. In light of the need to urgently address such consequences, this paper will argue that it is necessary to reconceptualize development as a continual process, and not an end goal, in order to re-envision to roles of MNCs, international bodies such as the United Nations, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). This paper will investigate possibilities of reconceptualization of the roles of global actors through exploration of the United Nations' Global Compact, one example of a voluntary collaborative effort rooted in the UN but based on the concept of mutually changing roles of MNCs, the UN, and NGOs through collaborative learning. Because the Compact attempts to reach development goals through voluntary acceptance by the business community of nine internationally accepted principles of human rights, environment, and labour, it provides an insightful look at the future probability of maintaining social safety nets in the midst of a profit-driven global playing field.

When Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of United Nations, was questioned two years ago in a press conference about the possibility of the UN being misguided in allowing “big corporations to wrap themselves in the United Nations flag” under the guise of a voluntary multi-stakeholder initiative known as the Global Compact (GC), he responded that the UN was merely trying to “encourage corporations that have considerable influence, reach and power, to work with us in giving meaning to some of [the] values that their own governments have signed on to” (UN Press Release 2000). The values he was referring to are nine principles deemed “universal” owing to their roots in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Labour Organization’s Fundamental Principles on Rights at Work, and the Rio Principles on Environment and Development. The Global Compact invites participating companies to integrate these nine principles into their work, alongside other voluntary commitments, in an effort to move cooperatively towards responsible business practices, and ideally, “globalization with a human face” (ibid).

The UN Global Compact’s attempt to engage corporations has been the focus of both substantial criticism (predominantly from organized civil society) as well as great praise (mainly from mainstream press and the business sector). However, the bulk of its criticism has been for what the Compact *is not*, that is, an unyielding code of conduct for corporations with the power of enforcement parallel to guidelines outlined by the World Trade Organizations for its member countries.

The desire for such a code of conduct has arisen out of an international climate dominated by financial institutions that dictate global economic relations. While the integration of the world economy was initially expected to have been guided by the Bretton Woods framework of the immediate post-WWII period, its gradual demise has set the forces of economic liberalization into motion in a way that has led to an imbalanced distribution of the costs of globalization. Economic and sometimes national borders have become irrelevant, creating a market that is the playground of influential global actors. One of globalization's most visible marks has been the rapid progress of communication and transport technology, overcoming past spatial and temporal challenges faced by businesses. Within such a context, multinational corporations (MNCs) have found abundant opportunity to transcend national borders and invest in countries in the South that offer a large supply of cheap labour, and consequently, higher profit margins. As L.C. Thurow has noted,

For the first time in human history, anything can be made anywhere and sold everywhere. In capitalist economies that means making each component and performing each activity at the place on the globe where it can be most cheaply done and selling the resulting products or services wherever prices and profits are highest. Minimizing costs and maximizing revenues is what profit maximization, the heart of capitalism, is all about. Sentimental attachment to some geographic part of the world is not part of the system (Thurow, 1995: 115).

While corporations have not formed any such "sentimental attachments", their present state has raised the urgent need to address the impact of such global commercial activities on the countries of the South, whose low-cost material and human resources are integral to the profit margin of MNCs. Well-known examples of human rights abuse and environmental negligence resulting from MNC activity have placed the impact of corporate involvement in the South in an unsympathetic spotlight, and heightened the concern of corporate watchdogs, such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other actors involved in the general field of international development.

This paper departs from the premise that the current phase of globalization that has cultivated the far-reaching activities of MNCs requires the rethinking of present theory and practice of development in the South (McGee & Kumssa, 2001: 7). While the field of international development has traditionally played off of assumptions of inter-state relations with well-defined national boundaries, good political management, and certain assumptions about the mobility of capital and labour, products of globalization such as increased MNC activity in the South leads to the need for reconsideration of development theory in a global context. Increasingly, as international bodies assert that goals of traditionally-conceived development - including poverty reduction and sustained economic growth - can only be achieved through opening of borders and markets, economic liberalization, increased foreign direct investment (FDI), and increased trade, the field of

international development may need to be reconceived in the form of *global development* in order to achieve adequate structural change to respond to the needs of those who have thus far been the losers of globalization.

Immediate censure of such a proposition may be based on resistance to blindly accepting a global economic agenda driven by a Northern intellectual hegemony. However, this paper will argue that the potential ramifications of present global activities in the South, and those of MNCs in particular, has created a scenario where it is necessary for the field of development, and the actors with which it works, to re-envision their own role and reconstruct their function in response to the existing global system. This is necessary to maximize the potential for well-being in the South and move beyond the current phase of globalization into one that is more equitable. The UN's Global Compact initiative will be used as a tool to explore the changing directions of international bodies, as well as the need to re-envision the roles and responsibilities of actors such as MNCs who have increasing impact on the South and its development.

This paper is divided into four main parts. First, a brief consideration of the paper's theoretical points of departure will be followed by a discussion of the context within which the roles of major actors require re-envisioning and reformation. This includes the general context of a globalized world, as well as the evolving meanings and interpretations of "development". Following this discussion we will turn to an outline of the Global Compact where its conceptualization, its foundational principles and outcomes to date will be described. Finally, the viability of the Compact and its vision for MNC/UN/civil society relations will be considered through an exploration of how it has attempted to re-envision the role of corporations, and their relationship with other international actors involved in the development of the South. It should be mentioned that this paper neither endorses nor disapproves of the Global Compact, and rather, uses it as an exploratory tool for one model of future global development ventures. Both the comments of proponents and critics of the Compact will be considered.

THEORETICAL POINTS OF DEPARTURE

Central to this paper is the idea that the body of knowledge within which development theory thrives can change, and *has* changed since the post-WWII period according to the power dynamics of the international climate. This is not to say that either previous or present "knowledge" is more correct than the other, but rather that knowledge is remanufactured according to the dominant discourse dictated by existing power relations. This follows from the Foucauldian premise that interprets an objective concept of development as itself a historical product that rises from power

relations (Prado, 1995: 85). Thus “truth and knowledge are the highest-order value and the most elevated category in an established but transient practice or set of practices” (ibid: 44). Power, in the Foucauldian sense of the word (and as it will be applied in this paper) is “not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength” (Foucault 1980: 93). Rather, *power* has the same ontological status as *relations* because power is wholly relational. Foucault insists on “the strictly relational character of power relationships” (ibid: 95). In the context of international affairs, power is not to indicate the strength of one actor or institution relative to another, but is synonymous with “power relations”; it is only “in relation to one another and the extent to which they constrain one another” that current development discourse has evolved (Prado 1995: 67).

The implication for this premise is that what is considered to be truth and factual in development, and what the “correct” roles are for various actors, is continually evolving as a corollary to existing power relations. Departing from this premise, this paper will not conceive of development as an end goal, but instead a continual process of change. Amartya Sen’s conception of development is useful for this purpose, as he defines it as a process of expanding the real freedoms, and thus capabilities, that people enjoy (Sen 1999: 3). Envisioning development as a *process*, that is, a series of change that may or may not necessarily be moving towards an end, provides room for the roles of various actors to change as there is no *a priori* concept of their “ideal” role. This conception of development also demands that one keep perspective with regards to potential directions of change for the future.

THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

It was proposed in the introduction to this paper that the present field of international development may need to be reconceived as *global* development in order to re-envision the roles of actors who are playing an increasingly prominent role in the development of the South. Recreating our perception of development may be the new “New Deal”, possibly another such pivotal point in modern history. As John Ruggie, former Assistant Secretary-General of the UN, has explored in his concept of embedded liberalism, it took capitalist countries two world wars and surrounding events for new social understanding to result in the New Deal. This idea, of “a grand social bargain whereby all sectors of society agreed to open markets... but also to share the social adjustment costs that open markets inevitably produce” was brought upon by the lesson that global economic activity must be coupled with social safety nets in order to survive and thrive (Ruggie 2002). However, Ruggie asserts that the same lesson may need to be learned again, this time in a globalized world. With the state of Southern countries being what it is - a proclaimed “urgent crisis” for the last few decades -

this most recent phase of globalization requires rethinking of the roles and functions of present-day actors.

Living in a global world has drastically changed how economic activity occurs. Because an international world assumed the existence of national economies whose international functioning was considered to be external activity, governments could exert more control at their borders (ibid). Disappearing borders that led to rising global economic integration allowed transnationals to play an increasingly significant role worldwide. While international trade had dominated previous years of economic integration, the present era of globalization has seen MNCs as one of the main players on the world's economic stage. The number of MNCs has certainly risen in leaps and bounds, but more startling is their increasing share of foreign investment. The steps that MNCs have tread in the past decade is extraordinary. The early 1990s saw some 37,000 MNCs that controlled approximately \$2 trillion of the global stock of FDI. Today, there are single multinationals whose share of the global stock is greater than the GNP of a number of developing countries (McGee & Kumssa, 2001: 5).

Such vast economic flux in a relatively short time inevitably made a mark on the South where many MNCs extract resources and indulge in a large supply of cheap labour. The relationship between governments in the South and MNCs has become that of a "race to the bottom" as countries compete with each other for the cheapest labour and most comfortable set of parameters for the corporations to work within. In light of such circumstances, critical analysis of presently accepted development theory (which assumes certain things about capital, trade, and business) has shown that while there is general consensus that globalization has presented a challenge to the South and development, diverging views exist. One such view has accepted the inevitability of the forces of globalization and sees the key to achieving development goals within the existing global economic framework of liberalization. They are striving towards equitable solutions within the current state of global activity, but believe the present phase of globalization to be otherwise desirable. Another insists that "underdevelopment" has occurred as a result of the pursuits of "overdeveloped" countries in the North, and demands that the processes of globalization be slowed, and in extreme cases halted. Very few have perceived of the possibility of moving beyond, not to stop the process of globalization, but move into a different phase.

Concepts such as "corporate social responsibility" have emerged from such dialogue, referring to the desire that corporations be accountable to all stakeholders, and not just their shareholders, and that profit maximization no longer be their driving force. Because following the premise of "when in Rome, do as the Romans do" has led to the perpetuation, and in some case the creation, of unacceptable circumstances in the South, *stakeholder theory* asks that a corporation take into account the interest of "those groups which have a stake or claim on the firm." Stakeholders

include employees, local and national community, and the surrounding natural environment (Adams & Maine, 1998: 583-4).

It is evident that the context exists for reconsidering the roles of actors who are prominent in the development/maldevelopment of the South, however, there has been general resistance from both institutional and civil society communities to perceive of their own roles differently. Some parties may benefit from the current situation, and others may feel that their own role is not the problem. There is consensus, however, on the urgent need to address deplorable conditions in the South, but to do so will probably require acceptance of changing and new roles for all actors, taking into account the framework of globalization.

THE GLOBAL COMPACT

In 1999, Kofi Annan set into motion one of the world's most visible attempts to recreate and reinvent the roles of the major players on the international scene. Addressing the business community at the World Economic Forum in Davos, January 1999, Annan emphasized the importance of reasserting social safety nets to "limit economic volatility and compensate the victims of market failures" (UN Press Release 1999):

Our challenge today is to devise a similar compact on the global scale, to underpin the new global economy. If we succeed in that, we would lay the foundation for an age of global prosperity, comparable to that enjoyed by the industrialized countries in the decades after the Second World War. Specifically, I call on you -- individually through your firms, and collectively through your business associations -- to embrace, support and enact a set of core values in the areas of human rights, labour standards, and environmental practices (ibid).

The compact Annan referred to in his address has since been well established as the UN Global Compact, a direct attempt to engage the corporate sector in acting in their "enlightened self-interest" through the integration of corporate social responsibility in their local and global practices. Some 400 companies are presently participating in it, and the GC office is confident that it will reach its goal of engaging one thousand companies by July 2003.

Despite the fact that the GC office has several effective information portals, including a comprehensive website that is designed to act as a forum for exchange among all participants, as well as several well-respected spokespeople such as John Ruggie, who have repeatedly tried to clarify the Compact's objectives, substantial criticism has amounted to its becoming a controversial initiative with misunderstood intentions. This may be due in part to the Compact's non-regulatory nature, which raises the eyebrows of many regarding how effective its parameters may be.

The GC's basic foundation is a challenge to corporations to act on nine principles drawn from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Labour Organization's Fundamental Principles on Rights at Work and the Rio Principles on Environment and Development. Thus, it is *not* (as the GC's spokespeople stress on a frequent basis) a regulatory code, nor does it attempt to replace the concept of a regulatory code of conduct for corporations. The Compact is an entirely voluntary initiative which requires the active involvement of the corporate sector, international labour, NGOs, and academic circles in order for it to be an effective project. It draws its legitimacy from the international process which led to the establishment of the nine principles that it seeks to promote, as well as through the stewardship of the Secretary-General, who in turn must answer to the General Assembly.

Four Commitments

Throughout his advocacy of the Compact, Ruggie has formulated a simple means of clarifying its wide-ranging scope through a list of four main commitments that companies are asked to undertake in order to be considered participants of the GC. The first is simply that participants become public advocates for the Compact and the principles on which it is based. "Advocacy" is not defined in detail, but rather, companies are encouraged to include the nine universally-accepted principles in mission statements, annual reports, newsletters, and similar venues, on the premise that "their doing so will raise the level of attention paid to, and of responsibility for, these concerns within firms" (Ruggie 2002). The role of advocacy extends to the other participants of the Compact as well, such as NGOs, labour, and academics.

Secondly, companies are asked to share the concrete steps they have taken to incorporate the nine principles into their corporate domains, as well as the lessons they have learned in the process. This communication is required to occur at least once a year, and through the medium of the GC's website. By consistently showcasing concrete actions and subsequent lessons-learned, the Compact hopes to form an online dialogue about "what deserves to be labelled a good practice, which the UN will then promote" (ibid). This facet of the Compact, known as the Learning Forum, will ideally lead to a learning bank which can serve as a collective resource to all participants, and is the first of three main mechanisms used by the GC to invoke global engagement across sectors.

The pilot phase of the Learning Forum concluded in October 2001, and based on the results led to a formalized structure and process to maximize the efficacy of this medium for dialogue. With the aim of yearly submissions of case studies, the results of which will be analyzed through methodology developed by a network of academics, the Learning Forum hopes to identify good practices, and eventually "best practices". The most recent report of the GC's progress and activities

concluded that none of the preliminary “examples” that were submitted (examples are preliminary case-studies with less formal structure) conformed to the GC office’s guidelines, and of the thirty submissions, half did not actually address implementation of the nine principles directly (UNGC, 2002: 18). It is hoped that the next round of submissions will mark improved performance, thus demonstrating the GC’s effect on participating companies.

Third (and possibly most importantly to the process of development) participating companies are asked to join with the UN in optional partnership development projects in the South, and specifically in the so-called least development countries (LDCs) which have been largely marginalized by globalization. Because Annan’s vision of the Global Compact was largely motivated by developmental goals (Ruggie 2000b), this aspect of the project is of particular interest to the UN. Thus far, examples of participation have included “support for micro-lending, investment promotion, HIV/AIDS awareness and treatment for employees in sub-Saharan Africa, [and] devising sustainable alternatives to child labour,” among other initiatives (Ruggie 2002). The broad purpose of this aspect of the Compact is to further “align a company’s activities with the Compact’s nine principles,” (UNGC, 2002: 22). Partnership Projects represent the second of the three mechanisms of global engagement.

Last of all, companies are asked to engage in thematic dialogues among all participants of the Compact, specifically “significant social dilemmas that business has capacity to resolve” (ibid). The last of the three mechanisms of cross-sector global engagement, the Global Compact Policy Dialogues have been the initiative’s most comprehensive attempt at bringing together leaders and experts from different international communities, including business, labour, academics and civil society, in order to study the challenges of globalization in an inter-disciplinary manner. The first policy dialogue, which is almost ready to summarize its conclusions, dealt with issues of business in zones of conflict, and while the second dialogue concerning business contributions to sustainable development met for the first two times this past year.

THE COMPACT: RE-ENVISIONING GLOBAL RELATIONS?

A editorial written in the Christian Science Monitor at the time of the Global Compact’s launch described it as Kofi Annan’s “most creative reinvention yet of the United Nations” (Ruggie 2000b). While this has been the view has been shared by some, there has been substantial criticism of this new role the UN has created for itself, in particular from civil society organizations. Criticism has not been always been directed at the idea of at all engaging the business community to work with a social conscience, but rather the Compact has been attacked as a soft approach because of its non-

regulatory nature. Such critics feel that the UN may be the only institution with the ability to exert democratic control over corporations (Corporate Watch, 2000: 4). Other more severe critics have asserted that because the UN is supposed to represent “we the peoples”, and because many corporations regularly impede upon the nine principles of the Compact, flirting with the business community should be deemed unacceptable (ibid). Such critique does not see the roles of either the UN or the members of the business community as malleable. Additional targets of criticism have included everything from questioning Kofi Annan’s intentions for the initiative, to logistical issues such as the limited corporate use of the UN logo (ibid: 3-4).

Does this criticism have a basis? Is a model of partnership-based global activity that supports development initiatives, and requires the reconceptualization of the traditional roles of the UN, corporations and NGOs, desirable? And if this model is desirable, is the Global Compact a viable pilot project? While the parameters of the Global Compact lend themselves to necessary scrutiny (specifically, the partnership of the world’s closest semblance of global governance with the corporate sector, infamous for its disparagement of human and labour rights, as well as the environment), this paper argues that such a reconceptualization is desirable in order for the present phase of corporate-led globalization to be transformed into something that spreads the benefits of globalism to the South. Furthermore, because of the present power relations among international actors, a network-based approach may pose the only viable means to mutual reformation. The rest of the paper will explore some of the challenges that the Global Compact has faced and will face, concluding that the model should certainly be used as an exploratory tool for the viability of changing the roles of players in the global playground, but must effectively integrate scrutiny and criticism as part of the learning process.

The Global Compact Model

In one of his many commentaries on the GC, Ruggie has noted that there is an imbalance in global rule making. He concludes, “Those rules that favour global market expansion have become more robust and enforceable... [while] rules intended to promote equally valid social objectives, such as poverty reduction, labour standards, human rights or environmental quality, lag behind and in some instances have actually become weaker” (Ruggie 2001). An inevitable reaction of concerned civil society has been to demand stronger measures to correct this imbalance, including regulatory codes for actors such as MNCs. Because the Global Compact is seen as the first tangible UN programme to invoke corporate social responsibility in the business community, its measures are not viewed as strong enough.

Rather than a regulatory code, the Global Compact has advanced as a voluntary initiative with a learning forum at its core, and as network-driven. These two elements have the ironic role of being both the Compact's greatest strengths, as they are innovative and inclusive, and its greatest weaknesses, as they are obvious alternatives to a regulatory code.

The core of the GC, the learning forum, assumes that dialogue among participants about initiatives taken by companies to integrate the nine principles into their activities will help identify good practices by consensus, and thus drive out bad practices "through the power of dialogue, transparency, advocacy and competition" (ibid). In response to the question of why the Secretary-General chose this approach over a regulatory code, Ruggie responds that not only would it be almost impossible to pass such a code through the General Assembly at the present time, the need for the UN to effectively enforce and regulate the code within a sea of hundreds and thousands of global companies and their supply chains would exceed its capacity. How the present international climate would handle the abrupt introduction of a regulatory code for corporations is unknown, but one may assume that one required element is the compliance of the business community itself. Without evolving the present relationship between business and "we the peoples", such an agreement seems unlikely. The Compact is presently seeking to act as a meeting place for those interested in participating in this evolving relationship.

The network base to the GC also allows for a reconceptualization of relationships among global actors since the progress of a network is based on the success of the collective bargain, not the effectiveness of coercion (ibid). A network also eliminates the need for the creation of new governing bodies, as the inter-organizational process leads to learning in relation to one another, and continually adapted roles and activity.

One such example is the relationship which exists between the Compact and the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), a multi-stakeholder initiative designed to "develop, promote and disseminate a global, generally accepted framework for voluntary reporting of the economic, environmental, and social performance of an organization" (UNGC website 1). The GRI network is itself extensive, and involves the same actors as the Compact. While they may be pursued independently, a partnership was created due to the two initiatives' complementary nature. The GRI offers one ingredient that is critical to the GC – accountability. By using the GRI's accepted reporting guidelines, information about concrete actions taken by participating organizations may be monitored in order to ensure improved performance (GRI website).

While the Global Compact has been scrutinized most for *not* being a regulatory code, its model may be the most likely to produce an environment where corporations must compete with each other in a corporate culture where corporate social responsibility is the norm, creating a new

role for corporations in the spectrum of development. However, absolutely crucial to this advancement is equal participation among *all* members of the Compact. Thus, while civil society has been most critical of the Compact's model, this criticism is a necessary element in the equation. Engaging NGOs brings about credibility to the process as they have more legitimacy in the public eye than corporations, however the present model of civil society engagement has had the unfortunate consequence of diffusing critique (Waddock 2002). NGO statements, letters, and participation in consultation processes are often felt to be a token element of a multi-stakeholder process which is ineffective and "has no teeth." By opening up to NGO consultation, there is a fear that their criticism may simply be diffused or neutralized once it is delivered to the institution or corporation in question. However, if constructive social dialogue is to occur through the Global Compact model, NGOs must stay critical and participate in the interplay between the UN and corporations. It is necessary that their critique allow businesses to learn from mistakes and problems, rather than just lead a company into a public relations clean-up, as the present case may be.

The role of governments must also be highlighted, as no other actor has the capability to monitor and engage with small and medium sized enterprises as national governments. As it was mentioned above, the UN does not have the capacity to monitor thousands of companies on a national level, in addition to MNCs (Ruggie 2001). This implies that the participation of governments will be key to the success of identifying good practices, and offering opportunities for partnership-based development initiatives to take place.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the nature of global activities in the South, particularly those of multinational corporations, has created the need to rethink the current theory and practice of development as global development, rather than just international, to incorporate the globalized playing field and its players. By rethinking the present state of development theory, the perceived roles of the various global actors could be allowed room to be re-envisioned. The aim of reconceptualizing development in light of globalization is not to return to "pre-globalization conditions, but rather to transcend the current globalization process," in order to re-embed social safety nets in global society and achieve a more equitable balance (Mittelman, 1994: 296). In order for re-envisioning the roles of global actors to be considered a legitimate exercise, development must be thought of as a process in continual flux, without *a priori notions* of their roles.

Discussion of the Global Compact allows for exploration of one model where the roles of prominent actors are being "re-invented". Because it is a voluntary initiative, new functions of their

roles can be explored in the format of a learning forum, where mistakes and bad practices can be identified, recorded, and thus hopefully not repeated. The network basis of the Compact also allows for actors involved in the development process to be re-envisioned in a process of partnership among all participants, so that their roles can change in relation to one another and the extent to which they constrain one another, reflecting the global context. The participation of NGOs and governments is crucial to this mutual learning, as criticism and advice from various viewpoints must be integrated into the dialogue without being diffused or neutralized.

At first glance, the Compact may be seen as an attempt by the UN to apply the motto, “If you can’t beat ‘em, organize ‘em.” It may even fail as an endeavour within the reality of the UN system at this time. However, it does provide a viable model for a dialogue-based restructuring of roles in order that the benefits and costs of globalization be shared equally. Possibly one of the most difficult parts of this process is to try and imagine that the role of a company that makes more money in ten minutes than the average person does in one year can possibly be re-invented in order to work for the losers of globalizations, rather than gain from them. This, nevertheless, is the definitive purpose of attempting to invoke such changes. As Ruggie noted in a speech made to the School of Policy Studies at Queen’s University, “This is a messy world we are moving into [for] it is full of contradictions and moral dilemmas” (Ruggie 2000a).

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