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Introduction

Corporations are global players insofar as they develop transnational networks of production and distribution and implement strategies that have far reaching implications for the quality of the ecosystem and the quality of life of the people of the world. In order to become global citizens, i.e. global responsible players, corporations must take very seriously the environmental problem, behave in a socially responsible way and cooperate effectively in the pursuit of the goals of sustainable development.

Twenty years ago the United Nations published the Report *Our Common Future*, better known as the Brundtland Report from the name of the Norwegian Prime Minister who chaired it. Differently from other official UN documents, the report formulated a thorough and courageous diagnosis of the environmental question, innovating the scientific language (it introduced the very concept of sustainable development). It alerted public opinion, raised the consciousness of decision-makers, and urged to act quickly and effectively.

The Brundtland Report was, however, written at a time when national governments were considered the only relevant actors of world politics and inter-governmental agreements the only way through which international problems could be managed. More specifically, it presumed what at the time seemed three “obvious facts:” (1) that national governments were still sovereign within their respective territories and policy domains; (2) that only by engaging them in negotiations that led to international treaties could relevant common goals be set; and (3) that these treaties, once agreed upon, would be ratified and faithfully applied by signatory states. Although bold and innovative in its analysis of the problem, the Report was short of policy results because of this conventional diagnosis of the political context, which proved to be more and more inadequate in the following years.

Since the publication of *Our Common Future* the world political system has changed dramatically, making explicit trends which were already present. The cost of transnational communication and exchange is falling precipitously; non-

state actors, such as non governmental organizations, collective movements and elites are growing in importance and transcending national borders; corporations are acquiring resources superior to all but a few sovereign states and are operating simultaneously and autonomously from national authorities; epistemic communities' are becoming more influential; domestic publics are becoming aware of and are being mobilized around foreign issues as never before; transnational 'massive flows of migrants across national and continental boundaries are revealing how difficult it had become for governments to control even the most element of sovereignty; the logic of the free market for capital, goods and services (but not people) has affirmed itself even in ideologically distant countries like China.

In this new context, global issues in general, and the issue of sustainable development in particular, have become more and more important, i.e. issues that: a) have dimensions and implications that bypass national borders, and must therefore be managed through collective cooperation, and b) whose solutions bypass the capability of individual states, however powerful they may be, and therefore imply the attribution of decision-making competences to institutions of global governance. Nation states remain key actors in policy-making, but the questions of the environment and of sustainable development (as global commons in general) cannot be coped with effectively by a set of decisions that the various governments take each by itself, since in so doing it is the national interest (and national selfishness) that prevails. And yet, the norms, institutions and the formal and informal processes that can integrate and regulate global relations are still inadequate. A global system is in the making, but it is fragmented, disarticulated and lacking the legitimacy that democratic nation states have. In the contemporary world a basic contradiction exists between the growing economic interdependence and social interconnectedness, on the one hand, and continuing political fragmentation and cultural heterogeneity, on the other. Globalization raises the question of global governance and the environmental question illustrates very well the need and the difficulties of global governance.