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Beyond Limits to Growth

Collaboration Between the International
Business and United Nations in Shaping
Global Environmental Governance

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Beyond Limits to Growth

Collaboration Between the International Business and United Nations in Shaping Global Environmental Governance

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Résumé

Ce *working paper* examine le rôle historique des multinationales dans la mise en place d'une gouvernance environnementale internationale. En s'appuyant sur de nombreux fonds d'archives, en particulier ceux de la Chambre de Commerce Internationale (CCI), l'objectif de ce *working paper* est de montrer que les organisations patronales internationales, en particulier la CCI, ont joué un rôle déterminant dans la transformation de la gouvernance environnementale mondiale entre la Conférence des Nations Unies sur l'environnement humain à Stockholm en 1972 et le Sommet de la Terre à Rio en 1992. La CCI, qui avait été mise à l'écart lors des débats à Stockholm, a progressivement réussi à s'imposer comme un partenaire clé des Nations Unies et à introduire, voire imposer une vision libérale de l'environnement qui mettait l'accent sur la croissance économique, les forces du marché, le libre-échange et l'autorégulation des entreprises comme instruments de la gouvernance environnementale. Alors que le débat environnemental à l'époque de la conférence de Stockholm en 1972 était centré sur la notion de limites à la croissance, nous constatons que la CCI a activement contribué, durant les deux décennies suivantes, à la définition du concept de développement durable. Ce *working paper* permet non seulement d'expliquer le rôle des multinationales dans l'émergence de ce concept, mais aussi de comprendre pourquoi la notion de développement durable a été si largement acceptée par le monde des affaires. Cette conception du développement durable a certes rendu possible une progressive prise de conscience écologique des entreprises, mais elle n'a pas favorisé l'introduction des mesures visant à empêcher l'aggravation de la crise environnementale, notamment le changement climatique.

Mots-clefs : environnement ; histoire ; organisations internationales ; business ; développement durable

Abstract

This working paper examines the historical role of business interests in shaping structures for global environmental governance. Drawing on extensive historical evidence from the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) and other archives, the paper demonstrates that international business associations, in particular the ICC were instrumental to the transformation of international environmental governance

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between the UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972 and Earth Summit in Rio in 1992. The ICC, which was sidelined in the debates on the environment in Stockholm in 1972, gradually managed to establish itself as a key partner for the United Nations and to introduce a liberal environmental vision that emphasized economic growth, market forces, free trade, and business self-regulation as a source of environmental governance. While environmental debate at the time for the Stockholm conference in 1972 was centered around the notion of *Limits to Growth* we find that the ICC actively contributed to the definition of the concept sustainable development. This paper not only helps to explain the role of business in constructing the concept of sustainable development but also why the concept became so widely accepted in the world business community. The problem was that this conception of sustainable development allowed for the incremental greening of corporations, which did not reflect the real need for measures to prevent the ongoing environmental crisis from worsening, including climate change.

Keywords: environment ; history ; international organisations ; business ; sustainable development

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Introduction

A half century has passed since the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment was held in Stockholm which set in motion discussion, negotiation and ratification of a whole series of international agreements (Najam, Papa & Taiyab 2006). The processes that started with the 1972 Stockholm conference and the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) led via the Brundtland Commission (1987) up to the 1992 UN Conference on Economic Development in Rio. These historical processes laid the foundation for today's global environmental governance (GEG) system, including global governance of climate change (Ciplet & Roberts 2017). Although it is widely held that corporations and private regulatory initiatives have taken on functions once assumed to be the domain of the state and inter-governmental organizations (Newell 2005; Bartley 2021), the role of business in the invention of GEG has not yet been really studied (Sluga 2017 and 2022). No research has yet provided a synthesized and coherent history of how business interests, knowledge and ideas became integrated into the governance system.

Drawing on extensive historical evidence from the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) and other archives, the aim of this paper is to show that international business associations, in particular the ICC were instrumental to the transformation of international environmental governance between Stockholm and Rio. As has been widely noticed in the literature on GEG, the period between Stockholm and Rio covers an underlying trend in a shift in the balance of power away from state- and government-centered approaches towards markets and a liberal environmental governance regime (Berstein 2001; Newell 2005). Much of the existing research that covered the period prior to the Rio conference has however focused on the impact by political leaders, diplomats, scientists, environmentalists, NGOs and international organizations such as Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Macekura 2015; Schmelzer 2016; Borowy 2019). In this established narrative, business actors played no significant role (Berstein 2001) or only gained some influence at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s (Sklair 2001; Clapp 2005; Chatterjee & Finger 2014; Pestre 2016 and 2020; Kaplan & Mun 2020).

Yet, as we will demonstrate in this paper, the ICC became an important partner of UNEP in the 1970s and the 1980s and was able to influence the increasing importance of market mechanisms within international environmental governance. The ICC and UNEP developed a collaboration/partnership that by the mid-1980s resulted in a convergence of perceptions that bridged previous conflicting views on the relationship between industrial growth and the environment. Together, the ICC and UNEP worked to construct the concept of sustainable development, in which market mechanisms and voluntary business action were seen as constructive and vital forces. Moreover, the ICC was able to connect to the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) or Brundtland Commission and progressively develop a coherent set of environmental management rules, to which firms committed and which were recognized by international organizations. These rules helped the ICC to promote the principles of self-regulation and to legitimate its call for less governmental intervention, a position which became dominant after Rio.

It is important to note that the ICC was a world organization with a long tradition of cooperation with international organizations, in particular the United Nations (on the ICC, see David & Eichenberger 2020 and 2022). Moreover, the ICC represented business as a whole and not one particular sector. It could count on the financial, organizational and reputational support of major multinationals. The ICC's transnational and cross-sectoral organization allowed it to coordinate even the conflicting interests of other international business associations. Finally, several

conditions were favorable to the ICC, particularly the economic and ideological climate of the 1980s, which was largely defined by economic globalization, the rise of neoliberalism during the Reagan and Thatcher era, the opening of communist economies to market mechanisms, and the economic difficulties of the United Nations, including UNEP. The ICC's members strengthened this new neoliberal world order, which marked a strong contrast with the previous decade's New International Economic Order (NIEO) characterized by the UN's attempts to regulate multinationals (Gilman 2015; Kott 2021).

This paper is divided in four parts. After a literature review and a brief presentation of the concept of legitimacy central to understand the most important issues at stake in the international environmental governance, the paper focuses on two "turning points" in the interactions between business and the United Nations in order to understand how sustainable development and environmental private rules gained legitimacy in the international realm during the 1970s and the 1980s. First, it investigates the period which began around the Stockholm Conference and lasted until the World Industry Conference on Environmental Management (WICEM) held at Versailles, Paris, in 1984. During this first phase, we see how business and International Organizations progressively reconciled their views on the environmental issue. Second, it focuses on the period up to the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, which saw the building of a consensus around the notion of sustainable development between business associations and the UN organizations, in particular the Brundtland Commission.

Literature Review and Contribution

A wide range of scholars have noted that, by the 1980s, the notion of sustainable development had replaced the 1970s perceptions of biophysical limits to growth and government-centered approaches to address global environmental challenges (Berstein 2002; Borowy 2014). Some have argued that the invention of sustainable development in global governance was interrelated with the rise of neoliberal ideas in the 1980s (Levy & Newell 2005), coupled with the UN's newfound trust in transnational corporations to address the profound environmental challenges of the early 1990s (Hildeyard 1993). These changes represented a major shift from the 1970s, when business and the capitalist system was generally seen as the problem behind the global environmental crisis, rather than being seen as a part of the solution. As noted by Jones (2017), the creation and diffusion of private regulation in terms of certification and new accounting tools from the 1990s on enabled large multinational corporations to engage in the environment, while enhancing value. Certification and environmental reporting enabled multinationals to demonstrate publicly that they were becoming more sustainable, while green washing simultaneously made the boundaries of the concept of sustainability so wide that any corporation could be engaged in it (Jones 2017: 233-262, 379). But overall, business historians have not engaged much with issues related to GEG (Bergquist 2019).

Sociologists and political scientists have studied how transnational corporations gained power in GEG from the 1990s (Clapp 1998; Levy & Newell 2005; Vogel 2009; Albareda et al. 2018). Parts of this research have looked at the role that transnational corporations have played in influencing global treaties, such as the Montreal Protocol on ozone, and their impact on governments (Falkner 2005), including those in the Global South. It has been suggested that corporate influence has been clearest in the global rise of neoliberalism and its institutionalization in trade agreements (Bartley 2018).

An interrelated stream of research has focused on the evolution of business-led initiatives toward private regulations in the form of certification and standardization schemes, including codes of conduct as a source of governance (Haufler 2001). This “privatization” of authority has been typically seen in the context of an increasing belief in the superiority of market-driven policies and globalization from the 1990s (Levy & Newell 2005). A bulk of research has also focused on multilateral environmental governance mechanisms designed to influence the environmental behavior of multinationals. This research has looked at formal efforts to promote better environmental business practices developed by both industry-driven efforts or different kinds of partnerships between business and environmental organizations and/or international organizations such as the United Nations (Clapp 1998, 23-34). The literature on neoliberalism in environmental governance has, however, been broadly critical about the triumph of “market rule” and the power of corporate interests in the governance system (Newell & Roberts 2017) and showed that international business can construct rules to avoid being constrained by states and international regulations. But little attention has so far been paid to the specific conditions under which international business coordinated their political/lobbying efforts in global environmental politics between Stockholm and Rio and managed to achieve not only influence but also legitimacy.

Business responses to environmental challenges have not been monolithic, but have moved along an evolutionary adaptive learning process forming specific attitudes or modes of business responses during certain sub-periods (Hoffman 1997; Jones 2017; Rome 2019). Business history studies give no clear and coherent picture of how business have responded to the new complex of environmental issues emerging since the 1960s. The way different national polices and contexts shaped business strategies to manage growing environmental concerns is likewise uncertain (Bergquist 2019). What has been argued is that corporate environmentalism in the 1960s and 1970s generally embraced the recognition that environmental issues were a problem that necessitated regulatory control, and business responded with a strategy of regulatory compliance (Hoffman 1997; Hoffman & Bansal 2012) This was also reflected in established economic theories of business and environment relations at the time. Economists contended that misalignment between private and public interests caused unwanted harm and that government regulation was needed to realign conflicting incentives. Government policies were typically based on command-and-control regulations (Bergquist et al. 2019).

It has been argued that business then adopted more pro-active and strategic approaches in the 1980s and the early 1990s (Hoffman 1997), supported by new ideas from the academic community about how firms could reduce their environmental impacts while reaping economic benefits (Bergquist et al. 2019). Leading corporate strategy scholars began in the early 1990s to argue that voluntary business action to protect the environment offered opportunities for private profit (Porter 1991; Porter & Van der Linde 1995; Lovins et al. 1993; Elkington 1994). This new policy road promised a rapid, pain-free way of protecting and sustaining the natural environment (Berquist et al. 2019). Numerous businesses advocated for this new “win-win” approach and engaged in visible and effective voluntary activities. Various types of environmental management systems (EMS) emerged, such as the applications of total quality and lean production management techniques. In 1996, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) for example, launched the ISO 14001 standard, intended to help firms to take environmental considerations into account in all aspects of their operations (Clap 1998; Prakash & Potoski 2006).

The question, then, is how international business associations such as the ICC were able to engage with policy makers at the international level of governance. It is often assumed that corporate actors have *sought to gain* a seat at the negotiating table to impact legislation at the international level (Levy & Newell 2005; Kelly 2005; Newell

& Roberts 2017) but rarely have questions been raised about if and why business was actually *invited* to these tables and on what grounds. So far, very few scholars have studied the historical development of corporate environmentalism (Hoffman 1997; Rome 2019) in relation to the evolution of corporate environmental political strategy at international level. As we will demonstrate, UN and UNEP preferred early on to establish contact channels through umbrella organizations of the international industry and not through contacts with individual companies (on the role of Business Interest Associations (BIAs), see Galambos 1966; Schmitter & Streeck 1999; Rollings 2007; Lanza 2008; Orsini 2011). This study therefore contributes to an improved understanding of how business interests and the rules of market forces became integrated in international environmental governance in the two decades proceeding the Rio Conference. Researchers have agreed on the fact that international industry emerged well-organized with a united agenda in Rio, which had great significance on GEG for decades to come. Yet, the historical process that laid the foundation for this victory of international business interests in GEG remains to be explored.

In this article, we distinguish two periods. The first one began around the Stockholm Conference and lasted until the World Industry Conference on Environmental Management (WICEM), held at Versailles, Paris, in 1984, and organized by the UNEP in collaboration with the ICC. The second period, which coincides with the follow-up of WICEM up to the Earth Summit in Rio, sees the emergence of a convergence around the notion of sustainable development between business associations and the UN organizations. Exchange of expertise and the development of best practices help to create a transnational community in which “people bring together and collectively reflect upon experiences in various national or local societies or communities. They develop joint activities, define and pursue common goals and projects with a transnational scope and reach” (Djelic & Quack 2010, 27; see also David & Eichenberger 2022). The 1992 Earth Summit by the United Nations in Rio marked an important step as business and international organizations were united around a liberal market conception of sustainable development and the importance of developing private and transnational environmental rules.

From Stockholm to Versailles

The ICC during the 1972 Stockholm Conference and actions set in motion

The early 1970s set in motion vibrant actions within the ICC in the area of international environmental policy. Key aspects of the development assembled the impact of the Stockholm Conference in 1972, the establishment of cooperation between the ICC and UNEP, and ICC’s self-regulation initiatives in the area of the environment. These developments of the 1970s should, however, be seen against the fact that the Stockholm Conference stressed the notion of planetary limits to economic growth (Ward & Dubos 1972; Strong 1972; Paglia 2021), which questioned the postwar natural resource intensive growth path. Debates around the notions of limits intensified after the Stockholm Conference when the Club of Rome published its report *Limits to Growth* in 1972 (Meadows et al. 1972; on the Club of Rome see Schmelzer 2016, chap. 7). In the 1970s, environmental protection and growth were seen as difficult, even as impossible, to reconcile in the long run, given future population growth (Ekins 1993). From an industry perspective, environmental regulations came in the 1970s with a cost of investments in abatement technologies. Multinationals faced the challenge of nationally-divergent environmental policies (Rugman & Verbeke 1998). The impact of such complexities has been clearly

demonstrated in Jones (2005) work on the history of Unilever, whose highly diversified nature handicapped the development of a strong corporate-wide environmental strategy while it also had to struggle with figuring out what to do in different legal jurisdictions and countries with lower income levels (Jones 2005, 342-347). And as we will see, what the ICC feared most was that governmental regulations would severely complicate international trade and transnational business operations.

In April in 1971 the ICC held its biennial congress in Vienna under the theme "Technology and Society: A Challenge to the Private Enterprise". The discussions were based upon a background report on global environmental problems prepared in advance by Lord Solly Zuckerman, the former Chief Scientific Advisor to the British Government. The Vienna Conference, which would later be viewed as the landmark in ICCs engagement on the environment, led to the adoption of a "Statement of Conclusion", which accepted and recognized the responsibility that global industry had in the "matters of environment". Noticing the rapidly increasing mobilization around the environmental issue at international level, participants at Vienna Congress urgently recommended the establishment of a Special Environmental Committee within the ICC to deal with these matters. The first substantial task of the Committee was to prepare a contribution from world industry to the Stockholm Conference in 1972.³

Later that year, Charles S. Dennison, Director of the Overseas Development Council and member of the ICC US board participated as the only business representative of a three-day retreat in Aspen, Colorado, aimed at discussing the content of the Stockholm Conference. In his report, he warned his ICC colleagues of the difficulties they would meet in the following years in the field of international environmental regulation: "Lest the impression be given that the environment effort will be a cooperative tea party, it is obvious that the international industrial community will be involved in a rough, immensely costly struggle." In his view, it was thus urgent to act immediately and the ICC was the best option.

The international environmental situation is moving rapidly - much more rapidly than institutional preparations by the business community, either in the U.S. or elsewhere. The ICC should speed and sharpen its action (...). Most major U.S. firms are fully aware of the environmental-ecological-technological area in terms of their domestic operations. The increasing dependence of these firms on their international operations makes it essential that they become equally alert to the international implications as well. There is no better instrument available for this purpose than the ICC.⁴

This call for action was heard by the ICC headquarters. Its Special Environmental Committee met for the first time on 22 February in 1972 and concentrated its attention upon preparing a response to the basic documentation of the agenda for Stockholm Conference.⁵ A confidential consultation with the Conference General Secretary Maurice Strong took place at the ICC headquarters in Paris, a meeting that the ICC organized together with the International Institute for Environmental Affairs

³ Swedish National Committee of International Chamber of Commerce, National Archives (SICCNA), Box 11, "Special committee on the environment. Proposal for an international environment center for industry", 29 November 1972.

⁴ Hagley Museum, P. D. Reed Papers, Box 21, Memorandum "1971 International Environment Workshop, Aspen Colorado, July 1971", from Charles S. Dennison, Acting Chairman, Development Committee, US Council of the ICC to Willis C. Armstrong, President, 29 July 1971.

⁵ SICCNA, Box 11, "Special Committee on the Environment. Memorandum of decisions taken at a meeting on 22 February 1972".

(IIEA)⁶. Strong promised to provide informal information about the upcoming conference to the business leaders and to answer questions. It should be mentioned that Aurelio Pecci, the vice chair of the Club of Rome who had commissioned the *Limits to growth* report, also attended the meeting in Paris.⁷ ICC's relation to Strong would prove to be important for both parties in the future. Strong would later become the General Secretary of UNEP – the anchor organization of international environmental governance from 1973 – a member of the Brundtland Commission and eventually the General Secretary of the Rio Conference.

The ICC raised early concerns that decisions and actions resulting from the Stockholm Conference would have future implications for trade and for international economic relations in general. Product and production regulations imposed on specific industries had to be harmonized according to ICC's view.⁸ In order to be well prepared and reach an impact in Stockholm, the ICC, following the initiative of the Federation of Swedish Industries, organized the *World Industry Conference on the Human Environment* in Gothenburg, only a few weeks before the Stockholm conference. The Gothenburg conference was attended by over 100 industrialists from 17 countries, as well as representatives of the United Nations, OECD and the European Economic Community (EEC). A unanimous statement by the conference participants was submitted to Maurice Strong, who brought it to the attention of the national delegates in Stockholm.⁹

In Stockholm, the ICC was represented by an eleven-man delegation led by the Secretary General Walter Hill and the chairman of the Special Committee of the Environment John Langley.¹⁰ As it turned out, business representatives were somehow set aside in Stockholm (Hill 1972). In an address speech to a plenary session, Walter Hill argued that the conference had too much focus on science. He stressed the role that industry must necessarily play in any successful global effort to improve the environment and expressed his concern about the apparent lack of awareness of this role at the Conference. The president of the Federation of Swedish Industries and members of the ICC Environmental Committee expressed similar views to the international press.¹¹ While opposing detailed regulation, Hill argued that the market economy provided the best conditions to address environmental problems and called for harmonization of environmental requirements.¹² The ICC also requested more national and international cooperation and to be actively involved with the UN in the future. One suggestion was to set up an international "know-how" bank under the auspices of the UN.¹³

To strengthen its position, the ICC developed during the years that followed the Stockholm Conference an environmental program around two axes: the establishment of cooperation with UNEP and the definition of self-regulated

⁶ On the International Institute for Environmental Affairs set up in 1971 by Robert O. Anderson, see Satterthwaite, 2006, 12 and f.

⁷ SICCNA, Box 11, Letter from Walter Hill to Axel Iveroth, 26 January 1972; Program for "Private Briefing for World Business Leaders" by Maurice Strong, 21 February 1972. On the role of business at the Stockholm Conference, see Sluga 2017 and 2022.

⁸ SICCNA, Box 11, "Industry and Environment V. Identification and control of pollutants of broad international significance", 1972.

⁹ SICCNA, Box 11, "The World Industry Conference on the Human Environment 29 – 30 May Gothenburg, Sweden. Conclusions adopted by the Final Plenary Session"; "Special committee on the environment. Proposal for an international environment center for industry", 29 November 1972, 2.

¹⁰ John Langley (UK) was at the time chairman of the environmental and technical legislation committee of the Confederation of British Industry and director of Imperial Tobacco Group Ltd.

¹¹ SICCNA, Box 11, "Special Committee on the Environment. Memorandum for Discussion", 1972.

¹² SICCNA, Box 11, Plenary Speech by Walter Hill, 8 June, 1972.

¹³ Federation of Swedish Industries, *Vår Miljö*, no 7, 1972.

measures. This program had a lasting impact on the ICC as it helped the organization to develop a coherent market-oriented discourse on international environmental regulation, which it linked with consistent management practices.

The Center for Industry and the Environment (ICIE) and the difficult relations between the ICC and UNEP

A few weeks after the Stockholm conference, Walter Hill met with Strong to discuss future cooperation between the ICC and the United Nations on environmental questions. Strong explained that the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) was developing a permanent organization, UNEP, that would start its operations in the early 1973. Strong envisaged that there would be people in the new organization responsible for relations with the industry. Such relations should, according to Strong, cover general policy discussions, the creation of an informal panel of independent technological advisers and agreements for consulting industry on specific questions including proposals for new regulations. Strong also told that UN would "rely heavily on the ICC" for advice and help in finding the right people.¹⁴ The ICC tasked its Special Committee on the Environment to draw up a proposal for an international center, with a first preparatory meeting held in November in 1972.¹⁵

In 1973, the ICC launched the Center for Industry and the Environment. Introducing this initiative at the ICC Congress of Rio in May 1973, MacGregor, the CEO of AMAX, an American mining company, justified the creation of this center by arguing that it would be a symbol "that industry recognized and accepted its responsibilities for the environment". For MacGregor, the Center would be an important intermediary between businessmen and UNEP. It would act as a "two-way transmission line" by identifying "for private industry and its organizations the priority concerns of the intergovernmental agencies." The Center would then, in this way, enable the "intergovernmental assessment of environmental problems in full knowledge of industry's support and capabilities."¹⁶

The Center was created at the end of the year on the initiative of English and American businessmen. However, it never met MacGregor's expectations and it disappeared at the beginning of the 1980s in total anonymity. This happened for several reasons. First, membership constituted an issue. The Center decided to only recruit business associations as members. Many prospective business associations decided not to join the Centre to avoid repeating existing efforts elsewhere. The Federation of Danish Industries, for example, refused to finance the Center, preferring instead to participate in the international business associations to which its members already belonged, like the ICC, the Business and Industry Advisory Committee to the OECD (BIAC), the Council of European Industrial Federations (CEIF) and the Union des Industries de la Communauté Européenne (UNICE). The Federation of Danish Industries, in other words, focused its efforts on collaborating with BIAs rather than creating a new organization.¹⁷ Second, the ICC faced logistical

¹⁴ SICCNA, Box 11, "Special Committee on the Environment. Cooperation between the ICC and the UN on environment question". Note from the Secretary General presented at a meeting on 28 July 1972.

¹⁵ SICCNA, Box 11, "Special Committee on the Environment. Memorandum for Discussion", 1972.

¹⁶ Pace University School of Law Library, Winifred Armstrong Papers, Box 6, Series 5, 6/1973, Ian MacGregor, "Industry and the Environment", Keynote Speech, XXIVth Congress of the ICC, Rio de Janeiro, 21 May 1973.

¹⁷ Pace University School of Law Library, Winifred Armstrong Papers, Box 6, Series 5, 9, Special Committee on Environment, Meeting on 28 March 1973 International Center for Industry and the Environment, Extracts from first written reactions to the Outline for an International Centre for Industry and the Environment.

problems that arose from the decision of the United Nations to locate UNEP in Nairobi in order to recognize the importance of developing countries, which made the hiring of ICIE staff expensive and difficult.¹⁸

The relationship between the Center and the ICC was another major issue. A division of labor was established between the two: the ICIE focused mostly on the transmission of information and never took the role of a policy-making body, which was instead assigned to the ICC. US members of the ICIE Board criticized this relationship and frequently argued that they would have preferred the Centre to be more autonomous.¹⁹ But the main obstacle was the mistrust between the ICC and UNEP. Strong had declared his ambition to create a "pragmatic relationship" with businessmen and that he "regarded the ICC as the primary channel of communication with industry". The ICC addressed two main criticisms to UNEP. According to the ICC, UNEP had "interpreted environment too widely" and "had achieved too little on environmental issues *stricto sensu*".²⁰ Moreover, the ICC regretted that the relationship was unequivocal, criticizing the fact that UNEP was not sharing information. Some US members of the board of ICIE even feared that it could be "swallowed up by UNEP, becoming a functioning arm of its activities."²¹

The mistrust was mutual. In a letter to Maurice Strong, Leon de Rosen, Director of Industry at UNEP, wrote about a requirement of the US ICC committee to take the lead of an industry workshop organized by UNEP: "You should not allow yourself to be led by industry into a position from which there would be no retreat. You should use me in the forefront and, as God, remain in the background in order not to jeopardize any subsequent trade off if and when required."²²

The definition of self-regulated measures: the ICC's Environmental Guidelines for World Industry

In his speech in Rio in 1973, MacGregor also proposed that the ICC should define an International Code of Environmental Practice which would include "fair and equitable rules of industry behavior in the field of the environment". One year later, the ICC Congress in Hamburg adopted its *Environmental Guidelines for World Industry*. In a first step, the US Committee redacted a draft which was painstakingly revised by a special working Group and by national committees.²³ F. Taylor Ostrander, economist at AMAX and one of the members of the special Working Group, explained that there was "a great deal of policy in these Guidelines", complaining about the "unknowledgeable or capricious or just plain unconstructive proposals from some of the National Committees".²⁴

¹⁸ Pace University School of Law Library, Winifred Armstrong Papers, Box 6, Series 5, 15/1972, Letter of F. Taylor Ostrander to Raymond K. Fenelon, 18 January 1974.

¹⁹ Institut für Zeitgeschichte (IfZ), Munich, ED 708/2/131, "Aufzeichnungssitzungen über Umweltfragen am 28.03.1973 in Paris".

²⁰ IfZ, Munich, ED 708/2/138, Special Committee on Environment, 25 November 1977, 6.

²¹ Pace University School of Law Library, Winifred Armstrong Papers, Box 6, Series 5, 15/1972, Meeting Materials, Memorandum by F. Taylor Ostrander to U. S. Members of ICIE, 23 May 1974, 1.

²² Environmental Science and Public Policy Archives, Lamont Library, Harvard Yard, Maurice F. Strong papers (thereafter Maurice F. Strong papers), Box 122, Folder 1157, Letter from De Rosen to Strong, 16 December 1974.

²³ Pace University School of Law Library, Winifred Armstrong Papers, Box 6, Series 5, 3/1974, Winifred Armstrong to M. Stanley Dampsey, 15 January 1974.

²⁴ Pace University School of Law Library, Winifred Armstrong Papers, Box 6, Series 5, 3/1974, Letter of F. Taylor Ostrander to Raymond K. Fenelon, International Chamber of Commerce, 18 January 1974, 1.

The document eventually adopted perfectly represented the ICC's preference for self-regulation by business (David and Eichenberger 2020).²⁵ The *Environmental Guidelines* summarized the ICC's environmental policy and norms. It included an Introduction and 31 Guidelines divided into eight categories. Concerning the international environmental governance, the ICC emphasized that environmental measures should not "distort international trade relationships" and argued that the command-and-control methods increasingly introduced by national governments should be limited and complemented by self-regulatory measures. At the firm level, these guidelines remained very general and did not address in detail the operation of environmental norms and measures within enterprises. Technological research, development, and exchange were considered to be the best way to protect the environment, and in particular, to control pollution. At the beginning of the 1980's, these Guidelines were revised for the first time. The justification given for this revision is interesting because it shows the limitations of this first version: "This updating seemed highly desirable as the present guidelines were somewhat too general having been prepared at a time when industry had felt that a very cautious approach to the subject was required."²⁶

The relationship between the ICC and UNEP was also related to UN's declaration of the NIEO in 1974 with attempts to regulate multinationals (Gilman 2015). This utterly provoked the ICC and was a great source of distrust (White 1975). Moreover, the discourse was not in favor of international business. When Strong made his introductory statement in front of UNEP's Governing Council in 1973, he called for new growth concepts and models for economic and social development.²⁷ Strong relied on the scientific background work for the Stockholm Conference that outlined potential biophysical "Outer Limits" in relation to the generation of heat, the carbon dioxide content of the atmosphere, the ozone content of the stratosphere, and the health of the oceans.²⁸ But UNEP's more natural science-based view on the relation between growth and the environment widened in the 1980s. As will be demonstrated in the following section, UNEP would invite the ICC to the driver's seat and examine a somewhat less strenuous road forward beyond limits.

Towards a peace treaty in Versailles

In 1982, at the tenth-year anniversary of the Stockholm Conference, UNEP and the ICC organized separate conferences. In April, the ICC organized in Stockholm the *World Industry Conference on the Environment* in cooperation with the Federation of Swedish Industries, with representatives from UNEP, the World Bank and others. Some 100 industrialists met to report "on industry's achievements in environmental protection". The Conference welcomed cooperation between UNEP and the ICC, but

²⁵ The *Environmental Guidelines* were thus directly inspired by the *ICC Guidelines for International Investment* that had been written just after the Second World War under the influence of the neo-liberal economist Heilperin in order to protect investment abroad. These regulatory guidelines were, according to Slobodian, the "first version of what would become today's regime of international investment law"; see Slobodian, 2018, 136. The *ICC Guidelines for International Investment* had been revised in 1971 and the ICC wondered at the beginning if it should not add to these ICC Guidelines another section labeled "Environment", before deciding to develop an entirely separate set of specific environmental guidelines; see Pace University School of Law Library, Winifred Armstrong Papers, Box 6, Series 5, 2/1973, "Environmental Guidelines for International Investment", 5 February 1973.

²⁶ IfZ, Munich, ED 708/2/138, 1978-1980, Special Committee on Environment, Meeting on 28 September 1979.

²⁷ Maurice F. Strong papers, Box 33, Introductory Statement Geneva, 12 July 1973.

²⁸ Maurice F. Strong papers, Box 34, Folder 335, Report on the consultation on "Outer Limits" held in Aspen, Colorado, 19-24 August 1973.

business still complained that it had "been too much of a one-way traffic" as industry, "often providing the information", had "little influence on its use". The Conference also re-emphasized that environmental legislation and regulations had to be reasonably harmonized worldwide to diminish the risk of harmful distortion of competition and trade. More growth, not less, would result in environmental improvements through technological development (ICC & Federation of Swedish Industries, 1982, 4-6). Yet, the atmosphere at the conference was not pessimistic and industry appeared confident that it could provide a technological fix to environmental problems while maintaining economic growth. Successful cases were demonstrated from the chemical industry, pulp and paper, the steel industry and others. "We must substitute for the false alternative: protection of the environment or economic growth", as the Director of the Environment Consumer Protection and Nuclear Safety Commission of the European Communities put it (ICC & Federation of Swedish Industries, 1982, 41). The Deputy Executive Director of UNEP, Peter S. Thacher, proclaimed in his keynote speech that never before had the need for cooperation between the world business community – as it is represented by the ICC and other organizations that come together in UNEP – been greater. Nor had the prospects for mutual advantage been more promising (ICC & Federation of Swedish Industries, 1982, 14).

One month later, in Nairobi, 105 government delegations, intergovernmental organizations and U.N. agencies and representatives of more than one hundred NGOs met to review the evolution of the environment during the last decade. Their objective was to assess the activities of UNEP and to formulate scenario for the future. The assessment of the environment during the decade was "rather grim" (Struthers 1983, 276). However, strong disagreement emerged between industrialized countries, in particular the United States and developed nations. The latter wanted to develop multilateral environmental cooperation by expanding UNEP's activities, which the US opposed. In fact, as a US Nairobi delegate reported, the Reagan administration was "defensive and even hostile towards multilateral cooperation for resolving global environmental problems" (Struthers 1983, 281). Collaboration with industry was mentioned but did not constitute an important topic of the agenda.

Only a year later after Nairobi, in 1983, the Governing Council of UNEP approved a resolution "urging the world industry to convene an international conference to examine ways in which their technological and scientific expertise could be applied".²⁹ This was the first time the UN officially called on the industry to help solve environmental problems. The result was the first WICEM, held at Versailles, Paris, in 1984, and was organized by the UNEP in collaboration with the ICC. A wide range of leading multinational corporations, including Exxon, Gulf Oil, United States Steel Corporation, Ford, Union Carbide, Dow Chemical, Nestlé, Unilever, Shell, Henkel AG and others sponsored and attended the conference. In sum, the conference brought more than 500 government and business representatives together from developed and developing countries to examine how companies could meet the growing challenges and concerns with respect to the long-term effects of pollution on the planet.

How was it then, that UNEP had reached out to the ICC to organize a joint conference and that the ICC had accepted this proposal only one year after the failed conference in Nairobi? Perhaps the ICC 1982 meeting in Stockholm was a good experience in contrast to Nairobi. Thomas M. McCarthy, Chairman of the ICC environment committee and Director of Technical Relations Europe for the US multinational Procter & Gamble, offered a more precise answer. As he put it, the ICC accepted Mustafa Tolba's (Maurice Strong's successor) proposition because it "noted an important

²⁹ Maurice F. Strong papers, Box 272, Folder VII, "News Release. World Environment Center", 3 June 1983.

change in the attitude of the Executive Director of UNEP towards the industry”.³⁰ Tolba, in an interview, summarized this change: “For the past 10 years, we have been trying to convert the converted – we have been talking to the environmentalists and we have not tried to go beyond that. (...) Now I intend to go straight to industry and business for support.”³¹

Three main factors were responsible for Tolba’s conversion. First, UNEP was facing serious financial difficulties largely due to the diminishing contributions of the US to the UN (Ivanova 2007 and 2021). Organizing an international conference with the financial support of industry was a way to expand UNEP’s activities without putting too much strain on its finances. Second, by working with the private industry, UNEP hoped to gain the favor of the U.S. government, its main funder, which had been very critical of UNEP in Nairobi. As Gregory J. Newell, Assistant Secretary of State, explained: the Reagan administration “sought to encourage a broader role for the private sector in international forums, because we believe that the private sector can greatly contribute to solutions for a wide range of international economic and development problems”³². Third, the creation of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1983 and the appointment, by United Nations Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, of Gro Harlem Brundtland as chairman of the Commission was a blow to UNEP (Ivanova 2021). Maurice Strong, who was part of the Commission, had tried to reassure Tolba that the Commission “must in no sense be perceived by UNEP or anyone else as being anti-UNEP”; he had also asserted that “the Commission will be operating at arm’s length from UNEP” in order to “make its contribution to UNEP both more useful and more credible”.³³ And yet, the Commission emerged during the second half of the 1980s as the environmental flagship of the UN. Collaborating with industry was a way for UNEP to regain some influence within the UN. For the ICC, the conference as such provided a great opportunity to prove their legitimate right get much more involved in the governmental policy discussions at both national and international level.

Until Winter 1984 the conference planned by Tolba was steered by an organizing committee based in the United States and composed almost exclusively of US businessmen. However, this strategy quickly proved to be counterproductive. First, the Europeans were losing interest in this conference as indicated by the sponsoring of the conference; out of the 24 companies that contributed, generally to the tune of 10,000 dollars, only one was European: Ciba-Geigy.³⁴ Four months before the start of the Conference, only \$250,000 had been raised. This was far from the \$850,000 needed to host the event. It was, therefore, necessary to develop an active European and Japanese involvement. Moreover, it was absolutely essential to “de-Americanize the preparatory efforts” if WICEM was to be perceived by developing countries as a

³⁰ IfZ, ED 708/2/141, 1984, ICC, Commission de l’environnement, Réunion du 10 février 1984, 10 February 1984, 2.

³¹ Maurice F. Strong papers, Box 272, Folder 2562, Ruth Pearson, “Industry, Environment Focus of UN Conference”, *The Journal of Commerce*, 3 June 1983.

³² Maurice F. Strong papers, Box 272, Folder 2563, Letter from Gregory J. Newell to David M. Roderick, Convenor World Industry Conference on Environmental Management, October 28 1983.

³³ Maurice F. Strong papers, Box 307, Folder 2913, Letter from Maurice Strong to Mostafa Tolba, 29 May 1984.

³⁴ Maurice F. Strong papers, Box 272, Folder 2563, “World Industry Conference on Environmental Management Sponsored by Industry and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in Cooperation with the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC)”, List of Contributors, 23 February 1984.

"genuine world-industry conference".³⁵ In the end, France decided to host the Conference.

For these three reasons, in early 1984, Tolba decided that most operations would be transferred from the US to Paris. This was made possible after discussions between UNEP and the ICC, in which the Chamber decided to take charge of the Conference. "Finally, we have the Europeans on board" wrote Casey E. Westell, the coordinator on the US side of the Conference, to Maurice Strong in February 1984.³⁶ But the ICC accepted to co-organize the Conference on its own terms. Some key ICC figures appeared on the board of the Conference. Thomas McCarthy became the Chairman of the Organizing Committee with Tolba. The ICC considerably diminished the costs of the conference and rapidly attracted new sponsors. By August 1984, European and Japanese firms were paying 40% of the subscriber fees for the Conference. The balance of power between the two institutions changed. It was no longer UNEP that set the pace; the ICC had taken the lead.

The notion of sustainable development and principles and recommendations of WICEM

In mid-November 1984, the conference was held in Paris. A special effort had been made to ensure that representatives from different regions of the world were present. The choice of the Château de Versailles to host the Conference was significant because of the historic importance of the Treaty of Versailles, but also because "the Palace, with its monumental gardens stretching away into the horizon, could hardly be bettered as an example of an orderly and highly-managed environment" (UNEP 1984, 1). The official statement for the conference was to examine what industry had achieved since 1970 and how these accomplishments could be transferred to developing countries and to "consider and generate new mechanism for industry-government cooperation in support for sustainable development". The Brundtland Commission had only started its work, but the notion of sustainable development was already in the air in Paris. In the draft report published in advance of the conference, Tolba and McCarthy jointly argued that "too often had debate about the environment issues been adversarial, and that too many people had seen them as 'either-or'". They made clear that the discussions at WICEM would focus on "how to achieve economic growth with environmental quality".³⁷ They noted that the concept of economic growth had been superseded in some circles by a qualified version of it – "sustainable development". But as they asked and then answered their own question:

[...] what does that [sustainable development] mean, exactly? Again, let us try a definition – and then throw it open for discussion. 'Sustainable', we suggest, means that development can be maintained indefinitely without damaging the environment – or threatening development itself.³⁸

Tolba and McCarthy also put forward a rhetorical question about whether sustainable development could happen. The answer was simply: "It has." The report was followed by a number of examples of successful business cases to demonstrate that win-win

³⁵ Maurice F. Strong papers, Box 272, Folder 2562, Minutes of the 10th Steering Committee held 29 March 1984, 3.

³⁶ Maurice F. Strong papers, Box 272, Folder 2563, Letter from Westell to Strong, 24 February 1984.

³⁷ Maurice F. Strong papers, Box 272, Folder 2564, Draft discussion paper for the Conference by Dr Mostafa K. Tolba and Mr Thomas M. McCarthy, Chapter II, 1.

³⁸ Maurice F. Strong papers, Box 272, Folder 2564, "Draft discussion paper for the Conference", 1.

outcomes between environmental protection and growth were achievable.³⁹ During the Conference, some speakers emphasized the importance of sustainability, such as Gro Harlem Brundtland, who had been appointed one year prior to WICEM as Chairman of the WCED. She was not the only member of the Commission that attended Conference. The US EPA administrator William Ruckelhaus, also a member of the Commission, served as a convener and keynote speaker. In the final Conference report, the notion of "sustainable economic development" was adopted. According to Erik Lykke, OECD's Director of Environment, this conclusion would not have been possible ten years ago. It was, as Lykke put it, "a widely held view that environmental protection could be achieved only at the expense of slower economic growth."⁴⁰

The Conference also emphasized the importance of the collaboration between different stakeholders, especially industry and government. Industry was thus considered to be an important partner of government, international organizations, and NGOs in the arena of international environmental governance. This marked a major shift since Stockholm. Multinationals, so decried a decade ago by international organizations, were now seen by UNEP as key players "in helping to raise the standard of environmental management in those countries in which they operated" (UNEP 1984, 14). Robert O Anderson, Chairman of Atlantic Richfield Company, the world's ninth largest oil company (Roscow 1981, 81-84), had attended both the Stockholm Conference in 1972 (Sluga 2017) and the Versailles Conference and reported after Versailles that "For me, a key aspect of Versailles was a strong recognition – far less obvious in Stockholm – that the problems we face in the environment will not be solved by governments alone [...]" (Anderson 1985, 8).

At the level of the firm, the Conference marked an important step in the definition of environmental norms, their operationalization within the enterprise, and their recognition by businessmen and international organizations. Leaders of industry, governments and international organizations discussed several management tools during the conference: cost-benefit analysis⁴¹, self-regulated Guidelines, and Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). During the 1990s, the assessment became one of the pillars of environmental auditing that was promoted by the ICC as a self-regulated internal management tool (Hillary 1998, 75; Pestre 2020).

A key issue addressed time and again at WICEM was the efficiency of self-regulation by industry. As we saw, the ICC, which had published its *Environmental Guidelines for World Industry* in 1973 and revised them in 1981, was a strong proponent of self-regulation. At the press conference of WICEM, König, the secretary General of the ICC, declared that "international environmental standards should be expressed

³⁹ Maurice F. Strong papers, Box 272, Folder 2564, "Draft discussion paper for the Conference", 1.

⁴⁰ UNEP, "World Industry Conference on Environmental Management (WICEM). Outcome and Reactions", 3. If this was the position of the large majority of the covenants, there were one or two dissonant voices such as Anil Agarwal, Director of the Centre for Science and Environment in New Delhi, who stressed that the model of industrialization of developed countries was "destroying the environmentally-sound lifestyles of the world's peoples, the bewildering variety of lifestyles that had emerged not as historical accident but as a response to the world's biological diversity"; see UNEP, 6.

⁴¹ Despite some reservations on cost/benefit analysis from representatives of industry and government, the WICEM principles stated that cost/benefit analysis was "an essential element of environmental decision-making. The cost/benefit system should be improved to attempt to quantify the value of critical elements in our cultural heritage."; UNEP, "World Industry Conference on Environmental Management (WICEM). Outcome and Reactions", 10. Some participants even wonder if the accounting industry should include a "profit and loss" statement of environmental costs and benefits, foreshadowing the growth of environmental accounting in the following years. Maurice F. Strong papers, Box 272, Folder 2564, Draft discussion paper for the Conference by Dr Mostafa K. Tolba and Mr Thomas M. McCarthy, Chapter II, 20.

through guidelines and codes rather than through legally binding treaties among nations. The reason? The virtual impossibility of drafting treaties that are equally appropriate to the many nations asked to ratify them."⁴² Contrary to the 1970s, the ICC was not alone. For example, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) was a strong supporter of voluntary codes of conduct after a successful collaboration with representatives of the shipping industry to combat vessel-borne pollution. However, the necessity of introducing such measures did not convince everybody. Some NGOs and governmental representatives questioned whether these code of conduct "could be anything more than public relations exercises". And some businessmen feared that they could be "the first step on the road to more restrictive legislation and standards." (UNEP 1984, 24) Finally, the Conference recommended the importance of stimulating different forms of self-regulation.

From Versailles to Rio

During the first phase, we see how business and International Organizations had at the beginning of the 1970s very divergent views on the nexus of environment-development and did not trust each other. However, due to the rise of neoliberal policies in the United Kingdom and the United States and the financial difficulties of the United Nations at the beginning of the following decade, they began to reconcile their views on the environmental issue as illustrated by the WICEM Conference. An important condition for the neoliberal shift was that UNEP adopted a new view that saw no inherent conflicts between growth and environmental protection. The second phase, which starts with the follow-up of Versailles and lasts until Rio, sees a growing convergence around the notion of sustainable development between business associations and the UN, in particular the Brundtland Commission.

WICEM'S follow-up

WICEM marked an important turning point. First, relations between UNEP and the ICC profoundly changed with the organization of the Conference. Second, WICEM marked an important step in the ICC effort to implement sustainable industry concepts in daily business and administration of firms. Third, WICEM illustrated a new form of business lobbying. CEOs of multinationals began to play an increasing role in the ICC's environmental strategy in addition to national and technical committees. WICEM paved the way for the Chamber's great influence at Rio.

Two periods can be distinguished between Versailles and Rio. The first lasted until 1987 which saw two important landmarks in GEG: the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, UNEP's greatest success during the 1980's, and the publication of *Our Common Future*, the report of the Brundtland Commission which had been created in December 1983 by the United Nations to think about the Environmental Perspective for the Year 2000 and Beyond. The second period lasted until Rio and was characterized by the discussions on the concept of sustainable development put forward by the WCED. After the publication of *Our Common Future*, a lot of international organizations and NGO's endorsed this concept (Borowy 2014, 172 and f.). The ICC became one of its main supporters and played an important role in the adoption of a (liberal) conception of sustainable development in Rio.

⁴² Maurice F. Strong papers, Box 272, Folder 2563, Statement by Mr. Hans Konig, Secretary General of the ICC prepared for WICEM Press Conference, Paris, 7 September 1984.

The ICC and UNEP

The organization of WICEM strengthened the ICC's links with UNEP. Three examples can show these new links. First, in 1985, less than one year after WICEM, the ICC revised its Environmental Guidelines with the goal to make them "increasingly specific and actionable" in response to the criticism that these Guidelines tended "to list general and philosophical principles rather than recommendations for specific action." The revised version of the ICC's Guidelines took into account remarks made by UNEP and bore "in mind the WICEM Conference Declaration".⁴³ Second, in Versailles, the ICC and UNEP had decided to organize an annual "summit" meeting between chief executive officers (CEOs) and Ministerial-level government officials in order "to provide the opportunity for a high-level overview of world-wide developments concerning industry and environmental management". The first of these ICC/UNEP high-level meetings was organized in January 1986 and focused on the follow-up of the conference.⁴⁴

Third, the ICC participated in a more constructive way in UNEP's conferences devoted to environmental issues. During this period, the negotiations which led to the Montreal Protocol in 1987 and the reversal of the depletion of the ozone layer were central as they were "UNEP's greatest achievement" (Ivanova 2021, 152). In his study of the role of business in the Montreal Protocol, Falkner (2008: 16-45) has showed the divergences and conflicts among business, in particular between the chemical industry, which produced chlorofluorocarbons (CFC), and CFC users, as well as the evolution of the interests of some of these firms. In a first step, the chemical industry opposed CFC regulations. However, with the increasing political pressure, some of the firms, in particular DuPont, promoted the adoption of precautionary regulations. After the signature of the Montreal Protocol, the interests of producers and users diverged, which allowed for the rapid elimination of CFCs. The ICC followed closely and participated in the elaboration of the Montreal Protocol. It was also divided on the Protocol.⁴⁵ However, after the signature of the agreement, the ICC adopted another strategy, which aimed at supporting the rapid implementation of the Montreal Protocol and at helping industry, especially in developing countries, to "use appropriate substitutes."⁴⁶ As we will see, this strategy was part of the ICC's programme on sustainable development and strengthens the ICC's environmental legitimacy with the UN.

The ICC and the Brundtland Commission

During the three years which followed Versailles, provision of the ICC's input into the WCED constituted the main priority of the ICC Environment Commission.⁴⁷ This was vital, because ICC members had harshly criticized some preliminary versions of the Brundtland Report. The US committee estimated that a 1986 draft of the Report contained "much biased and fallacious data and suggestions for massive overregulation by governments and international organizations". The draft repeated

⁴³ IfZ, Munich, ED 708/2/142, 1983-1985, "Statement by Thomas M. McCarthy, Chairman of the Commission on Environment, ICC to UNEP's Governing Council at its Thirteenth Session Nairobi, 15 May 1985"; "ICC Environmental Guidelines for World Industry", 20 June 1985.

⁴⁴ IfZ, Munich, ED 708/2_143_1986-1987, Summary record of the Meeting of the ICC Commission on environment, 18 April 1986, 2-3.

⁴⁵ Archiv für Zeitgeschichte (AfZ), Zurich, 480.1.4.11.1.2, 1983-1988, Summary record of the Meeting of the ICC Commission on environment, 27 May 1988, 7-8.

⁴⁶ IfZ, Munich, ED 708/2/146, 1989, ICC's Own Programme on Sustainable Development, in ICC Brochure "Sustainable Development, the Business Approach", 1989, 22.

⁴⁷ See IfZ, Munich, ED 708/2/143, 1986-1987.

the “same old clichés and unbalanced approach to complex environmental factors we have been hearing from those who see environmental issues as means to further their own social, economic and philosophical philosophies.”⁴⁸ It urged the ICC to intervene.

The ICC was able to influence the Brundtland Report through several channels. It expressed its concern during the public hearings organized by the WCED in several regions of the world (Borowy 2014, 70). More importantly, Thomas McCarthy, the Chairman of the ICC Environment Committee, was a member of the Industry Panel, one of the three panels established by the Commission to comment on various drafts of the report. The ICC also had privileged access to some members of the Commission, such as Susanna Agnelli, an Italian politician and businesswoman, who belonged to the family who owned the main Italian automobile manufacturer, Fiat. Her brother, Umberto, was a member of the ICC from the 1960s to the 1980s. The US ICC Committee had direct contacts with William Ruckelshaus, the US member of the WCED (Borowy 2014, 68). Maurice Strong, also a commissioner, was not hostile to endorsing business interests since he had “become heavily involved in big business” after Stockholm (Chatterjee & Finger 2014, 105). Finally, the ICC was in regular contact with the Commission Secretariat which was chaired by Jim MacNeill, the former director of the Environment Directorate at OECD. MacNeill had played an important role in advancing OECD’s agenda, which emphasized the importance of market mechanisms rather than governmental regulations to define environmental policies (Borowy 2017, 222).

It was worth the effort. “Following the extensive input made by the industry-based members”, McCarthy believed that “the ICC and business at large would be able to “live with” the final report.”⁴⁹ Even if the ICC expressed some reservations on the final version of the Brundtland report, on issues such as energy, it welcomed the publication of *Our Common Future*, stating that it addressed “significant issues which require the attention of industry, especially the concept of sustainable development.” It added that the business community should accept the WCED’s proposition to cooperate with governments and international organisations “in fostering sustained economic growth consistent with environmental quality.”⁵⁰ According to Sally E. Eden, a British geographer who studied the ICC’s sustainable development policy during the first half of the 1990’s, *Our Common Future* was indeed favorable to business interests: “In stating that economic growth was not only inevitable but also necessary for good environmental management and North-South equity, the Brundtland Commission opened the door for the business perspective on sustainable development. Previously, within a no- or low-growth framework, business had difficulties influencing the agenda in a positive light.” (Eden 1994, 161)

The road to Rio

The publication of *Our Common Future* was a huge success. However, as emphasized by Iris Borowy (2014, 179), the broad acceptance of the concept “created a competition of who could ‘pin his or her definition to the term’ and thereby gain influence over future development decisions”. The ICC participated in this

⁴⁸ IfZ, Munich, ED 708/2_143_1986-1987, ICC Commission on environment, Draft Report of WCED Advisory Panel on Industry and Sustainable Development, Meeting on 18 April 1986, Telex from Mr. Don McCollister (Chairman of the U.S. Council's Environment Committee), to Mr. F.A. Meier (Switzerland) with copy for International Headquarters, 3.

⁴⁹ IfZ, Munich, ED 708/2/143, 1986-1987, Summary record of the Meeting of the ICC Commission on environment, 18 April 1986, 7.

⁵⁰ IfZ, Munich, ED 708/2/146, 1989, ICC comments on “Our Common Future”, Document No.210/253 Rev, 23 September 1989.

competition. From 1988, it listed environmental issues as one of its three highest priorities. In a paper describing its strategy, it put forward that the “exact meaning of sustainable development is (...) highly debatable.” However, it believed that “business spokesmen must take part in such debates, and that they must be properly briefed so as to make a strong and positive contribution”.⁵¹ In this competition, the ICC was able to build a strong legitimacy in GEG and thus gain a huge influence. At the same time, there were tensions within the UN institutions and UNEP was sidelined in the lead-up to Rio (Ivanova 2021, 227).

According to Chatterjee and Finger (2014), during the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, business and industry shaped the very way in which international environmental governance was considered as well as the boundaries of the definition of sustainable development. To account for the success of business and the ICC, they put forward a number of factors, foremost among which was its funding of the Conference, its “global organizational structure”, and the fact that it was extremely well-prepared. It is true that since the mid-1980s, the ICC had been closely associated to UN works on environment and was therefore able to include the UN’s call for sustainable development in management environment conceptions. It is interesting to describe briefly the three most important dimensions of ICC’s strategy which gave the ICC a strong legitimacy: the operationalization of sustainable development; the initiation and coordination of business input into the major UN Conferences which follow the publication of *Our Common Future* and led to the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio; and the creation of a dense business network promoting sustainable development.⁵²

The operationalization of sustainable development

As Dominique Pestre (2020) has revealed, in the years prior to Rio, the ICC developed a coherent conception of sustainable development that was applied to the internal management of the firm, a process which had begun almost twenty years earlier. The ICC *Business Charter for Sustainable Development*, which was prepared in 1988, published in 1991, and then replaced the ICC Environmental Guidelines, summarized ICC conception on sustainable development (ICC 1991-a). The Charter, partly drafted by Shell, was the business community equivalent to the “Earth Charter” called for by the WCED⁵³. The Business Charter consisted of 16 principles to help companies to convert the vision of the Brundtland Commission into operational reality and “to demonstrate to governments and electorates that business is taking its environmental responsibilities seriously”⁵⁴. It was thus important to establish policies, programmes and practices “for conducting operations in an environmentally sound manner” and to integrate them “into each business as an essential element of management in all its functions.” It was necessary to assess environmental impacts before starting a new project, to develop products that could be recycled or reused, to train its employees and to contribute to the transfer of environmentally sound technology and management methods throughout the world. The last principle was entitled “Compliance and reporting”. It emphasized the need “to measure environmental performance”, “to conduct regular environmental audits and

⁵¹ IfZ, Munich, ED 708/2/146, 1989, Commission on Environment, Principal current ICC projects in the environmental area, February 1989, 5.

⁵² See for example IfZ, Munich, ED 708/2/146, 1989, ICC’s Own Programme on Sustainable Development, in ICC Brochure “Sustainable Development, the Business Approach”, 1989, 22.

⁵³ AfZ, Zurich, 480.1.4.9.4, ICC, Commission on Energy, Meeting on the 11 October 1991, Executive Summary, 2.

⁵⁴ AfZ, Zurich, 125.4.2., ICC Working Party on Sustainable Development, Background Note on the ICC “Business Charter for Sustainable Development. Principles for Environmental Management”, 11 December 1990.

assessments of compliance” and “to provide appropriate information” to the Board of Directors and the other stakeholders of the firm (ICC, 1991-a, 1-2). When launching the Charter, the ICC informed its members that its implementation was “essential for the establishment of public credibility in order to reduce government tendency to over-legislate and to strengthen business influence on public policies.”⁵⁵

Concretely, this conception of sustainable development favored voluntary and responsible commitments in four key areas (Pestre 2020; Robinson 2004): a new management approach to the environment embedded in the Total Quality Management (Chatterjee & Finger 2014, Chapter 8); the life cycle of process and products; environmental audits (ICC, 1991-b); and environmental marketing and labels.

On a more conceptual level, the concept of sustainable development put forward by the ICC differed somewhat from the one put developed the WCED. As *Our Common Future*, the ICC *Business Charter for Sustainable Development* stressed the environmental aspects of sustainable development (for example the necessity to manage the depletion of non-renewable resources and to minimize the impacts of waste on ecosystem integrity). However, by stressing environmental aspects, the Charter also “de-emphasizes social aspects, in particular intra- and intergenerational equity and the Brundtland emphasis on overwhelming priority to be given to meeting the needs of the world’s poor” (Barkemeyer et al. 2014, 23).

The follow-up of Our Common Future

The ICC was also an integral part of the follow-up of the report which became the environmental flagship of the United Nations. In 1990, the Environment Ministers of 34 countries of the ECE region attended the Bergen conference on sustainable development to discuss the Brundtland Report. As part of this conference, the ICC was asked to initiate and coordinate input from constituent businesses. Just before the Conference, the ICC arranged in Bergen an “Industry Forum on Environment” that was attended by 200 CEOs from all over the world, who deliberated the environmental challenges their businesses faced, as well as their views on sustainable development. The Forum concluded with an Industry Agenda for Action which the ICC later developed (Willums, 1990).

One year later, the ICC organized WICEM 2 in Rotterdam – “the most important ICC event in 1991”.⁵⁶ More than 750 representatives from industry, governments, and NGOs met to review the progress made in environmental management since the first WICEM Conference in 1984 and to prepare the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio. The message of the Conference concerning international environmental governance was a strong commitment from industry to the principles of sustainable development, which could be best achieved “by working within the framework of the market economy” and through open trade. Therefore, the ICC advised governments to strengthen GATT’s role of encouraging fair trade principles and to give priority to self-regulation over command-control approaches.

At the 1992 Rio Conference, the ICC reiterated its discourse and expressed its satisfaction that many of his recommendations had been taken into consideration by the United Nations. It also supported Agenda 21, the environmental action plan

⁵⁵ AfZ, Zurich, 124.1.3., WICEM 2, Second World Industry Conference on Environmental Management, Session 8: Strengthening Industry’s Role, 2 November 1991, 3.

⁵⁶ AfZ, Zurich, 124.1.2., Letter of Jean-Charles Rouher, General Secretary of the ICC, 28 January 1991.

adopted by 182 heads of state in Rio.⁵⁷ External observers could also note that the Rio Conference was a landmark success for multinationals. The final documents not only treated multinationals with a gentle hand but extolled them as key actors in the “battle of the planet” (Hildeyard 1993, 22).

Green business networks

The ICC’s influence can also be explained by the fact that it was at the center of “green business networks” (Sklair 2001, 204-205). Since 1985, two institutions directly related to the ICC, the ICC environment committee and the International Bureau of Environment (IEB), contributed to the elaboration of the ICC’s environmental management discourse. The ICC environment committee pursued its strategy to follow closely UN environmental policies. It also created an ICC Working Party, headed by Peter Bright, Head of Environmental Issues in Shell (London), which interacted with the Brundtland Commission and later drafted *The Business Charter for Sustainable Development*.

In 1985, one year after Versailles, Louis von Planta, CEO of CIBA-Geigy put forward the project of an International Bureau of Environment (on von Planta’s role in Swiss BIAs, see Pitteloud 2019). This Bureau, as he saw it, would be an “international clearing-house for the exchange of information on environmental management questions”.⁵⁸ Von Planta’s proposal had been elaborated by a group of five CEOs: Robert O. Anderson (ARCO), Louis Fernandez (Monsanto), Charles Parry (Alcoa) and David Roderick (US Steel). The support of Robert O. Anderson, the other main promoter of the IEB, was especially important. During the 1960s and the 1970s, Anderson had supported numerous environmental initiatives and was a known and respected figure among environmental organizations. His stature gave great legitimacy to Louis von Planta’s actions when he joined the Swiss businessman to launch the IEB.

The Bureau, which was created several months later, had two objectives. First, it was “concerned with the technological, managerial and operational aspects of environmental management rather than general and policy issues”; second, priority was “given to responding to the needs of industrial enterprises”.⁵⁹ In comparison with the ICIE, which was launched one decade earlier, the IEB had three main differences which helped to reinforce the legitimacy of the ICC’s environment policy towards its members on the one hand and IOs and NGOs on the other hand.

First, the organization had no problems pertaining to membership and no concerns about free riders. Multinationals, rather than business associations, founded and financed the IEB. The creation of the IEB illustrated indeed a new form of business lobbying, which had emerged during the 1970s and strengthened during the 1980s. Two of the four US CEOs who helped von Planta to launch the IEB, Charles Parry (Alcoa) and David Roderick (US Steel), were active members of the US Business Roundtable that had been created in 1972 (Nollert 2005; Waterhouse 2013, Chapter 3). This was not a coincidence. During the 1980s, under the pressure of public opinion, the US Business Roundtable shifted its environmental policy from “dogmatic

⁵⁷ See Prepared Statement of Jonathan Plaut, Chairman, Environment Committee, U.S. Council for International Business, 2 June 1992, in *U.S. Policy Toward the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Joint Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, (Washington, 1992), 254 and forward.

⁵⁸ IfZ, Munich, ED 708/2/143, 1986-1987, Summary record of the Meeting of the ICC Commission on Environment, 18 April 1986, 3.

⁵⁹ IfZ, Munich, ED 708/2/143, 1986-1987, ICC Commission on Environment, Meeting on 17 October 1986, 4.

opposition in the name of profits" towards a self-regulated and market-oriented one (Waterhouse 2013). The creation of the IEB showed that their European counterparts shared their environmental ethos. It is interesting to note that Louis von Planta was in 1983 one of the founders of the European Business Roundtable of Industrialists, modelled on the US Business Roundtable (Van Apeldoorn 2000; Pageaut 2010).

Business Roundtables also constituted a new form of BIAs, as self-selected CEOs of major corporations met at the continental level to develop greater political influence than they otherwise had in national- or sectoral-based business associations. The creation of the IEB illustrated this new form of businessmen lobbying—as the five CEOs who launched this initiative worked independently from the ICC and bypassed the organization entirely. Faced with a fait accompli and despite the reservation of the ICC's environmental committee, the ICC finally agreed to integrate the Bureau within its structure. The creation of the IEB thus illustrated the increasing influence of multinationals within the ICC.⁶⁰

Second, the relation between the United Nations, in particular UNEP and the Brundtland Commission, and ICC/BIE was much more cooperative than it had been ten years prior. The IEB was set up in Geneva close to the United Nations – not in Nairobi. Over the course of a decade, the IEB became a key institution within the ICC and strongly contributed to the strengthening of a coherent environmental vision and set of practices. Through the contacts of its staff with various international organizations, it reinforced the ICC's influence on the 1992 Rio Conference.⁶¹

Third, by providing services to firms around the world, in particular the provision of environmental management know-how and technology, the IEB enlarged the scope of the ICC's environmental activities, which were no longer restricted to Western multinationals.⁶² As a result, the IEB reinforced the global dimension of the ICC. In the second half of the 1980s, national ICC committees from the South participated in the development of the organization's sustainable development strategy. The 29th ICC Congress held in New Delhi in 1987 placed special emphasis on environmental topics. In his opening Address, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi addressed this issue. A session on "Combining economic growth and environmental progress" featured presentations by Mostafa Tolba (UNEP) and by Sayed Babar Ali (Pakistan). The latter was particularly significant as he was an important industrialist who collaborated during the 1970s and the 1980s in ICC's attempt to prohibit the introduction by the UN of a binding code of conduct on multinationals. He was also Chairman of the WWF and thus a respected figure among environmentalist NGOs.⁶³ This point is important. During the 1980s and 1990s, discussions on sustainable development, whether in the Brundtland Commission or in other international organizations, were marked by strong tensions between representatives of the industrialized countries of the North and of the countries of the South, the former refusing to finance the protection of the global environment which, according to the latter, could be a threat to their ability to develop (Macekura 2015). By contrast, the national committees of the ICC from the West and the South, were unanimous in

⁶⁰ See for example IfZ, Munich, ED 708/2/143, 1986-1987, Summary record of the Meeting of the ICC Commission on Environment, 18 April 1986, 3-6.

⁶¹ See IfZ, Munich ED 708/2/147, 1986-1988, Summary record of the Meeting of the ICC Commission on Environment, 13 May 1987, p. 4-6; Eden, "Using Sustainable Development," 163-164.

⁶² IfZ, Munich, ED 708/2/146, 1989, Commission on Environment, Principal current ICC projects in the environmental area, February 1989, 5.

⁶³ On this figure, see Interview with Syed Babar Ali, interviewed by Tarun Khanna, Boston, Massachusetts, 5 May 2016, Creating Emerging Markets Oral History Collection, Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School.

promoting a sustainable development strategy of the organization, which called for self-regulation and less state intervention.

From 1990, the ICC also received the support of the Business Council for Sustainable Development (BCSD), which was closely but indirectly associated to the ICC. In February 1990, Perez de Cuéllar appointed Maurice Strong as the Secretary-General for the for the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. One of Strong's first decisions was to appoint Stephan Schmidheiny, a Swiss industrialist close to the ICC and the IEB who had developed an early interest in environmental management issues, as his special adviser. Strong gave Schmidheiny two assignments: he was to act as the representative of business at the Rio summit and to encourage and promote a broad expansion of interests in sustainable development in business and industry.⁶⁴ In his new role as Special Adviser, and with the help of Edgard Woolard, Chairman of DuPont, Schmidheiny created the BCSD with forty-eight business leaders from around the world. The BCSD published a book for the Conference entitled *Changing Course. A Global Business Perspective on Development and the Environment*. Here, BCSD presented the business conception of environmental governance at the corporate and international level (Timberlake 2006, 51-59).

A division of labor developed between the ICC and the BCSD. In the introduction to the book, *From ideas and Actions*, which the IEB presented in Rio, its director, Jan-Olaf Willums, explained that the BSCD had "conveyed a vision of direction and a call for action", while the role of the IEB was "to transform a vision to reality" (Willums & Golüke 1992, 10). Moreover, some of the staff of the BCSD had worked during the 1980s for the ICC or the IEB, such as Hugh Faulkner, a former ICC Secretary General, whom Schmidheiny hired. However, some tensions – the origins of which are not clear – emerged, and in 1992 the ICC founded a new organization – the World Industry Council for the Environment (WICE) – "to lobby on environmental issues for business interests" (Chatterjee & Finger 2014, 115). The two organizations which had distinct models - WICE was based on a corporate commitment and BCSD on a CEO commitment – finally merged in 1995 to form the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD). This new organization would soon become a leading promoter of corporate environmentalism worldwide (Kaplan & Mun 2020).

In addition to the BCSD, the ICC also worked closely with another organization: the Global Environmental Management Initiative (GEMI) (Sklair 2001, 204; Haufler 2001, 45 and f.; Pestre 2020, 91 and f.). In 1989, the US Business Roundtable decided to create an organization that promoted in the United States and the wider world essential tools and measurement systems that would increase the efficacy of firms' environmental performance and sustainable development. The GEMI included 19 US multinationals and was related to the ICC as it was administered by the US Council Foundation, the educational arm of the US national committee of the ICC. One of the first projects of GEMI was to participate in the development of the ICC Business Charter for Sustainable Development. In 1992, it developed the Environmental Self-Assessment Program (ESAP) to assess a company's progress in meeting the 16 Environmental Management Principles of the Charter. ESAP intended to improve environmental management systems throughout business organizations (Hellem & Goldman 2009, 1-5).⁶⁵ This process of accountability gave a great legitimacy to the ICC Business Charter for Sustainable Development as it constituted an external verification of the environmental performance of firms that had adopted the Charter.

⁶⁴ Maurice F. Strong papers, Box 495. Folder 4675, "Draft: Summary description of proposed assignment of Dr. Stephan Schmidheiny", 25 June 1990.

⁶⁵ See also "Prepared Statement of Jonathan Plaut, Chairman, Environment Committee, U.S. Council for International Business, June 2 1992," in *U.S. Policy Toward the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Joint Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Affairs* (Washington, 1992), 255.

During the 1980's, a transnational community emerged from interactions across borders and institutions - business associations on the one hand, environmental international organisations on the other - oriented around a common project (Djelic & Quack 2010). Indeed, these green business networks, for all their differences, had one point in common: their faith in sustainable development based on self-regulation and voluntary codes (Sklair 2001, 204-205). This transnational community generated economic and management concepts that reflected a new consensus on the liberal economic order that triumphed in Rio. However, "there remains considerable heterogeneity between members" of these transnational communities (Djelic & Quack 2010, 27) - and also within these members. Indeed, some of the multinationals active in the promotion of sustainable development belonged at the same time to networks that were less environmentally friendly. As pointed by Jones (2017, 376), multinationals "are complex organizations which can make both real sustainability improvements and greenwash at the same time." Shell, the Anglo-Dutch oil multinational, is a good example.

Shell was heavily involved in the ICC's environmental turn during the second half of the 1980s. Peter Bright, Head of Environmental Issues in Shell (London), was member of the ICC's environmental committee since the mid 1980s. He became Chairman of the ICC Working Party, which interacted with the Brundtland Commission. In 1988, he reported that the Working Party believed that "the concept of sustainable development and the political strength of environmentalist or "green" ideas were steadily growing in importance. It was highly desirable for the business community, through inter alia the ICC, to take a proactive leadership position in facing up to this trend."⁶⁶ This position was not completely shared in his firm; in an internal review, some Shell managers estimated that the Brundtland Report was "overly optimistic" in its attempt to combine environmental protection and economic growth (Sluyterman 2010, 221). Bright was thereafter appointed Chairman of the ICC Working Party on Sustainable Development which elaborated and disseminated the ICC Charter. Shell's commitment was not restricted to the activities of Peter Bright. Lodewijk C. van Wachem, the President of Royal Dutch Shell, was one of the European CEOs who joined Schmidheiny's BCSD. The firm also became one of the founding members of WBCSD (Timberlake 2006, 11, 24, 76).

However, until the mid-1990s, Shell's environmental commitment remained modest. In fact, it was only after 1995 that it seriously attempted to incorporate the environment into its decision-making when two events damaged its reputation: its dispute with Greenpeace over Brent Spar, a floating oil storage facility in the North Sea, and the public complaints made by an ethnic minority in Nigeria against the environmental damage caused by Shell (Kolk & Levy 2001, 501-509; Frynas 2003; Sluyterman 2010). Moreover, in the early 1990s, Shell was strongly opposed to any measures to combat global warming. With other oil firms, it promoted "environmental skepticism" and disputed the seriousness of environmental damage (Dunlap & McCright 2011, 144-160). First, Shell financed the works of famous scientists to manufacture uncertainty about climate science. Three journalists have shown how Shell was, at the beginning of the 1990s, the main funder of the activities of Frits Böttcher, a prominent climate denier who was highly regarded in the Netherlands as the co-founder of the Dutch branch of the Club of Rome (Van Beek et al. 2020). Second, in 1989, Shell was among the founders of the Global Climate Coalition (GGC), a front group designed to combat the evidence of climate change. The firm was, in this capacity, a player in minimizing the influence of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that had been established by UNEP just one year

⁶⁶ IfZ, Munich, ED 708/2/145, 1988, ICC Commission on Environment, Meeting on 24 October 1988, 6.

prior. It was only in 1998 that Shell left the GGC (Kolk & Levy 2001, 502-503; on the response of Total, another oil multinational, to global warming, see Bonneuil 2021).

Conclusion

The 1970s and 1980s saw a profound transformation of global environmental governance, which gradually adhered to a liberal environmental vision that emphasized economic growth, market forces, free trade, and a withdrawal of the state. Some actors, such as BIAs, have played an important role in this process. The ICC, which was sidelined in the debates on the environment in Stockholm in 1972, gradually managed to establish itself as a key partner for the United Nations by the 1990s.

As we have seen, different rationalizations of legitimate governance were at stake after the Stockholm conference, not the least with the establishment of UNEP in 1973. The ICC organized to obtain a legitimate voice in the emerging international governance landscape as an expert organizational body that possessed needed experiences and knowledge for environmental policy discussions. The ICC's initiative to form the Center for Industry and Environment as an intermediary of information between business leaders and UNEP failed to become a legitimate body for policy discussions since the trust ties between the ICC and UNEP was still weak. As we also saw, what the ICC feared the most was that UNEP would encourage national governments to implement regulations that severely complicated future international trade and transnational business operations. The ICC proactively embarked on promoting business self-regulation as a governance mechanism and adopted in 1973 its first Environmental Guidelines for the World Industry.

The transformation of the Guidelines then illustrated ICC's changing conceptions and growing importance in global governance during these two decades. In 1973, the ICC Guidelines were barely noticed by the business community and by international organizations. In 1985, after discussions with UNEP and some NGOs, the ICC revised its Guidelines to make them "increasingly specific and actionable," and these recommendations progressively became adopted by firms around the world. In 1992, the ICC Charter for Sustainable Development, which replaced the ICC Guidelines, rapidly received support from a large number of companies and business organizations worldwide (over 1000 in Rio), many of them large multinationals. Through collaboration with *the Global Environmental Management Initiative*, the Charter became a tool that could be implemented in the daily management of firms. A broad legitimacy of the ICC's self-regulated Guidelines was created not only because the United Nations endorsed the Guidelines, but also because of ICC's global organization, its far-reaching networks, and the financial power of its members. All this contrasted greatly with UNEP's economic difficulties in the late 1970s and the 1980s.

An important prerequisite for the ICC's success in institutionalizing environmentally focused self-regulation in international business and global governance was the very concept of sustainable development. Initial discussions in the early 1980s about the concept encouraged visions and policy formulations that relied on market mechanisms and private sector initiatives. Important in this context was the neoliberal ideological shift that appeared with the Reagan and Thatcher administrations that encouraged a broader role for the private sector in international forums. By 1982, the ICC's argument that more growth, not less, would result in environmental improvements through technological development started to gain acceptance. This conceptual shift from Limits to Growth to Sustainable Development was clearly mirrored at the WICEM "peace conference" in Versailles in 1984, when

UNEP and the ICC agreed upon that the inherent conflict between growth and environmental protection – that had characterized the debate in 1970s – was a misconception. This new growth definition resolved previous deadlocks at the UN arena between rich and poor countries that was present already at the Stockholm conference, but it also enabled business and governments to come to a common consensus on a way forward.

This history not only helps to explain the role of business in constructing the concept of sustainable development but also why the concept of sustainable development became so widely accepted in the world business community. The ICC was by no means an external actor when the Brundtland Commission developed their report, and as this article has shown, the members of the Brundtland Commission and the ICC were somewhat partners in the same transnational community. The managerial and incremental approach used in the Brundtland report, along with its definition of sustainable development, became accepted by business since it was open to interpretation. The ICC succeeded by selectively adopting the notion of sustainable development and by combining it with environmental standards and rules that could be implemented within companies. This ability to articulate a liberal vision of global environmental governance with “sustainable” practice that could be applied to the management of firms enabled the ICC to convince a growing number of companies of the soundness of its self-regulation standards. It also convinced international organizations, environmental NGO’s and national governments of the need to transfer some of the state environmental responsibilities to business and the market forces.

The problem was though that this conception of sustainable development allowed for the incremental greening of corporations, which did not reflect the urgent need for measures to prevent the ongoing environmental crisis from worsening, including climate change.

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