

## **Book Review – 2004**

### **Business and Human Rights: Dilemmas and Solutions Edited by Rory Sullival, Insight Investment**

Review by Beatrice M. Spadacini

This comprehensive and valuable collection of essays provides an in-depth analysis of core issues related to business practices and human rights principles. In her forward, Mary Robinson, Executive Director of the Ethical Globalization Initiative and former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, draws attention at how over the last decade corporate attitudes to human rights have shifted and at the companies' potential impacts on both the social and political dimensions of human existence. The notion that human rights are universal and all-encompassing is emphasized throughout the book as essays focus on the full spectrum of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

Long gone are the days when businesses could just focus on making profits and minding their own business. In a global economy where information travels fast, stakeholders are many and goods are produced in several countries, new questions about roles and responsibilities of nation-states, global companies, and multilateral institutions are emerging. As the budgets of some transnational corporations transcend those of single countries, it is imperative to redress shifts in balance of power and business impact on national welfare.

In this book the pros and cons of business involvement in the promotion of human rights are discussed at length, starting with an overview of the historical evolution of the debate itself. Notorious scandals of corporate inaction or, worse, complicity with human right abuses are cited as the ignites of change. Shell, British Petroleum, and Exxon are but a few of the companies mentioned. Ironically, they are also the ones who have made significant strides in becoming more responsible corporate citizens.

Some contributors warn about the dangers of moving the human rights debate into the economic arena. They articulate a fear that corporations, especially in countries with weak governments, could end up setting the social agenda and thus neglecting the needs of the poorest and most marginalized. The Make Your Mark Campaign launched by the Body Shop, in collaboration with Amnesty International, to protect human rights defenders raised important ethical questions about the limitations and strengths of corporate campaigning.

Among the many topics covered, there are also the issues of company motivation and incentives used to promote corporate accountability. A brief chapter is dedicated to the fascinating yet still neglected topic of shareholder activism and socially responsible investors. The fact that some 40 multinational companies have explicit policy commitments to the protection and promotion of human rights is in itself an achievement but a far cry from a genuine global commitment to responsible practices. The

implementation of well-intentioned principles is more challenging than previously imagined, especially in a world where international as well as domestic laws are not always applied equally and consistently.

Two essays are worth mentioning on this, one deals with the issue of bribery and the role of multinational corporations in combating corruption, and the other one with the role of extractive industries operating in zones of conflict. Mining operations in areas of weak government, corrupt administrations, nationalist aspirations and strong but undisciplined security forces invariably confront human rights dilemmas and must have proper human rights policies in place. The case of Freeport McMoRan Copper and Gold Inc. and its Indonesian affiliate, PT Freeport Indonesia provide a pertinent example. Two years of serious human rights violations, including the death of several community members, prompted the company to finally take action to redress its own internal policies and to engage with both government security forces and local community leaders. Although some of the actions taken were considered controversial, they nevertheless contributed to abate violence.

Of particular interest to Global Alliance is the section on human rights in supply chains. This highlights key topics such as child labor, HIV&AIDS, voluntary standards to improve workplaces, and social capital investments in the Mexican maquiladoras. Although compelling, the essays only skim the surface of these issues as entire books could be devoted to each one of these themes. The Atlanta Partnership for the elimination of child labor from the production of hand\_stitched footballs provides an interesting example of how much the private sector can accomplish when it partners with experienced and specialized non profit organizations (Save the Children UK), as well as multilateral institutions (Unicef and International Labor Organization).

Apart from trying to cover too much, this book like most discussions about human rights and/or corporate social responsibility, runs the risk of being Western-driven, or conceptually detached from what actually happens on the ground and from what people in other parts of the world think. Although this collection of essays considers case studies from different countries, the overall analysis is undertaken by Anglophone experts. With the exception of a scholar from Mexico and one from India, most perspectives are processed through the cognitive lenses of researchers trained in Western academic institutions. Nothing wrong with that, but it would have been more reassuring to also hear the voices of human rights activists from the South.