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## **And the responsibility of business is...? A history of international norms for business**

– Working Title –

The social responsibility of business is to increase its profits. Or is it? The term corporate responsibility (CR) has remained a highly contested concept up to the present day. Indeed, the questions associated with it have become even more pressing in a globalised world: what responsibilities does business have – in development, in the North-South divide, in worldwide supply chains, and recently in climate change?

Being closely related to the overarching question of sustainable development, today CR is almost common talk. To grasp what the concept means and how it has changed our view on the role of corporations, it is helpful to look on its least common denominators: the international norms, standards and codes which have been being developed by various public and public-private organisations since the early 1970s.

This political endeavour constitutes a ground upon which the minimally acceptable behaviour of business can be defined and judged. Its outcome – the norms, standards and codes – thus resemble the human rights, which since their declaration have been forming the basic understanding of what each human being is entitled to. In other words: ideas about corporate responsibility do matter.

In my PhD thesis I show how some of the most important CR norms were created, used and revised over the past four decades. It is an intellectual history of concepts of corporate responsibility at the United Nations, the OECD, the ILO and the European Union. Based on archival studies and interviews I will not only ask how they were made, but also what were the beliefs, traditions and constraints that had informed them in the first place.

Among the many norms, standards and codes will narrate my intellectual history along the following examples:

- OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises (1976-)
- ILO Tripartite Declaration of Principles concerning Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy (1977-)
- United Nations Code of Conduct (1974-1991)
- UN Global Compact (1999-)
- UN Norms on the responsibilities of transnational corporations and other business enterprises with regard to human rights (2003; 2008)
- EU CSR Agenda (1970s-)

As for the theoretical background, my work draws on the blend of historical institutionalism that puts ideas in the limelight. Scholars such as Max Weber and Mario Rainer Lepsius and recently the likes of Peter Hall, Mark Blythe and W. Richard Scott have all argued for the importance of ideas in economic and political history.

However, it is particularly the work of Mark Bevir that inspired my approach. The political scientist and historian advocates the explanatory power of an interpretative approach in social science. Practices make only sense when we hold beliefs about them, and these beliefs in turn require and are informed by particular practises. For instance, (ir)responsible business behaviour depends on our ideas what the responsibilities of business are in the first place, just as some particularly repellent or appealing business practises do influence our beliefs about corporate responsibility. Added two other concepts –the the influence of the web of existing beliefs and the disruptive effect of dilemmas or constraints – Bevir's theoretical work lays the foundation for my intellectual history of international norms for business.

## **Literature**

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