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## Conference News: Corporate Social Responsibility and Development: Towards a New Agenda?

Report of the UNRISD Conference, November 2003, Geneva

As the “corporate social responsibility” (CSR) agenda has gathered momentum, so too has an international debate regarding its merits and limitations. The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) is particularly concerned with its developmental impacts and implications. As concerns have mounted, there have been increasing calls for regulatory approaches that emphasize corporate accountability, binding regulation and international law to control TNC activities. To examine these issues, UNRISD organized the conference, held from 17 - 18 November 2003 in Geneva, attracting 200 participants mainly from United Nations (UN) agencies, CSOs, research centres and the CSR service industry.

Rapid growth in the number and size of transnational corporations (TNCs), their global reach and visibility in people’s daily lives have heightened societal concerns about their social, environmental and developmental impacts. In response, an increasing number of companies are adopting a range of voluntary initiatives designed to improve in working conditions, environmental performance, and company relations with workers, consumers, local communities, activists and other stakeholders. At the core of this “corporate social responsibility” (CSR) agenda are specific policies and practices involving codes of conduct, environmental management systems, stakeholder dialogues, community investment

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and philanthropy, as well as reporting, auditing and certification related to social and environmental aspects.

A recurring theme throughout the conference centred on the fact that the scope, scale and quality of CSR essentially depend on the institutional and political contexts in which companies operate. The need for CSR policy makers and practitioners to be more sensitive to the developmental impacts of TNCs was emphasized by the conference.

This report summarizes the presentations, discussions and debates in terms of four areas of analysis: the developmental implications of CSR; the assessment of multistakeholder initiatives (MSIs) and public-private partnerships; corporate accountability and the regulatory role of the UN; and future directions for the CSR agenda.

**Conference News** is available free of charge from UNRISD.

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