

**M.A. Program in International Relations
International Organizations
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*What is the role of multinational corporations in the 21st
Century?*

Acronyms:

CSR	=	Corporate Social Responsibility
EU	=	European Union
ICTC	=	Intergovernmental Commission on Transnational Corporations
IGO	=	Intergovernmental Organization
ILO	=	International Labor Organization
MNC	=	Multinational Organization
NGO	=	Non-governmental Organization
UN	=	United Nations
UNCTAD	=	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
WHO	=	World Health Organization
WTO	=	World Trade Organization

Multinational (or Transnational) Corporations (MNC's) are traditionally viewed as unaccountable, unelected organizations whose only duty is to their shareholders and only interest is in the bottom line. The study of international organizations is usually limited to the study of Inter-Governmental Organizations (IGO's) and non-profit Non-Governmental Organizations. A. Leroy Bennett and James Bennett claim that MNC's "defy control and analysis in conventional terms;"¹ nonetheless, interdependence and globalization have given rise to immense MNC's and an attempt must be made to understand these new actors in the study of international organizations. This paper will examine the influence of MNC's in the world system, why corporations have a responsibility to promote human rights and in what ways the positive inputs of MNC's in the world system can be promoted and their negative factors limited.

The most basic definition of an international organization is an organization whose character or operations are international. Bennett and Oliver pigeonhole international organizations as either Inter-Governmental Organizations (IGO's) whose membership is made up of sovereign states and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) which are private organizations (both are sometimes referred to as IIGO and INGO, the "I" referring to International).² IGO's dominate the study of international organizations as their members are nation states, the primary political unit which continues to possess the most influence in the world system. However, increasing attention is being paid to non-profit seeking NGO's in the study of international organizations, whose numbers have proliferated in recent years. The Earth Summit in Rio was a defining moment of this proliferation, an event where some NGO's were

¹ A. LeRoy Bennett and James K. Oliver *International Organizations: Principles and Issues*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2002, 7th Ed. p.446

² Bennett - 2

directly involved in the negotiations and an additional 17,000 NGO representatives participated in an NGO parallel forum.

Despite an increasing focus on NGO's, key organizational groupings such as international criminal networks and MNC's are neglected. The influence of the latter has grown substantially in recent decades facilitated in part by the U.S. Government policy to "make the world safe for transnational corporate activity."³

Multinational corporations have their roots in 16th – 18th Century mercantilism in the East and West Indies when maritime nations led the expansion of trade. Similar to intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations the number of MNC's dramatically increased after World War II. Many North American corporations helped to rebuild war-torn Europe and this helped establish their presence in several nations.⁴

Capitalism, the predominant economic system in the world today, has facilitated the growth of MNC's. Capitalism is based on repetitive expansion and has an insatiable appetite for resources. MNC's continually search for new markets to exploit. As resources are depleted in the host country, corporations search for alternatives in others. This leads to MNC's expanding their presence in more countries and contributing to the interdependence of the world system. Opportunity for cooperation arises from such

³ Stephen R. Shalom "The Hierarchs' New World Order – and Ours" IN: Brecher, Jeremy, Childs John B. and Cutler, Jill, eds. *Global Visions: Beyond the New World Order*. Boston: South End Press, 1993. p. 13

⁴ Virginia Haufler (1998) Beyond Government: Business Self-Regulation in International Affairs [online] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Available from: <http://www.ciaonet.org.cuny-proxy1.libr.cuny.cuny.edu/conf/cei05/cei05a.html> [Accessed 20th October 2005]. p. 2

According to Jeffrey Tucker: "All told, the Marshall Plan dumped \$13 billion, or nearly \$100 billion in today's dollars. It was enough to firmly entrench American companies in European markets, especially in Britain, France, and Germany. American-controlled companies dominated industries such as shoes, milk, cereals, machines, cars, canned goods, petroleum refinement, locks and keys, printing, tires, soaps, clocks, farm machinery, and much more." Tucker, Jeffrey (1997) *The Marshall Plan Myth*, The Free Market, The Mises Institute Monthly: Vol. 15: No. 9

interdependence but so too does the risk of conflict. According to Bennett and Oliver, MNC's "reflect and contribute to global interdependence."⁵

Numerous examples exist of exploitative relationships between MNC's and host countries. The benefits of MNC investment and development have often cost the nation part of its sovereignty. Many former colonies are still in the process of nation-building and now have the added challenge of dealing with MNC's. Bennett and Oliver cite the United Fruit Company which interfered and influenced policies and legislation in Central American governments as an example of a lack of sovereignty. Other infamous examples of MNC's negative actions are Nestlé's marketing of formula in developing nations contributing to many infant deaths and Shell Oil's refusal to speak out when the Nigerian government executed human rights activists protecting Shell's activities.⁶

Such appalling examples are becoming less frequent as the information revolution has made it easier for NGO's and activists to disseminate information and the costs associated with bad press have increased immeasurably. Therefore, if an MNC wants to remain profitable it needs to be aware of international public opinion.

Since the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, the "state" is, and continues to be, the primary political unit in the world system. In spite of this, a fundamental shift is underway: multilateral organizations and MNC's are undermining the sovereignty and ability of nations to act independently. Paul Bracken believes "emerging capitalist countries cannot resist globalization [MNC's] because it is the fastest route to wealth and development. Consequently, the economic and political policy choices of those in power

⁵ Bennett - 304

⁶ Bennett - 279

narrow to the tight parameters needed to foster this wealth and development.”⁷ To illustrate the extent of the transfer of power from states to MNC’s, in 1998 General Motors, the world’s largest corporation, had revenues of \$161 billion, which was larger than the gross national product of over 160 countries.⁸ This has now been eclipsed by Wal-Mart which in 2004 had revenues of \$256.33 billion.⁹ Such wealth and domination of resources has caused hostility towards the prospect of so much unaccountable power moving into the hands of a small elite. The human rights regime has long advocated that those with power have a duty to protect human rights.¹⁰ The most recent manifestation of this doctrine is Resolution 60/1 at the 2005 World Summit Outcome “Responsibility to Protect.”¹¹ As the power, wealth and influence of MNC’s grow it follows that so too does the obligation or responsibility the MNC has to its employees and countries where it operates. Reconciling this responsibility with profit-making enterprises will be one of the greatest challenges of this generation.

To a certain extent MNC’s are embracing this responsibility. Bull et al have identified five areas where MNC involvement has increased: (1) Policy dialogue, (2)

⁷ Paul Bracken (2005) *Big Business and the Golden Straitjacket*, Yale Journal of International Affairs, Vol. 1, Issue 1 p. 54

⁸ Bennett - 277

⁹ Forbes Writers (2005) The World's Leading Companies [online] Forbes Magazine, Available from: <http://www.forbes.com/2004/03/24/04f2000land.html> [Accessed 20th November 2005]

¹⁰ Mary Robinson (2005) *Is a Fairer Globalization Possible?* The Carnegie Council, New York Society for Ethical Culture and openDemocracy.net, October 26, 2005 7:00 – 9:00 PM, 2 West 64 Street, New York, NY 10023

¹¹ Resolution adopted by the General Assembly - 60/1. 2005 World Summit Outcome. Available from: <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N05/487/60/PDF/N0548760.pdf?OpenElement> [Accessed 20th November 2005] p. 30

Text outlining the “Responsibility to Protect”: *Responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity* 138. *Each individual State has the responsibility to protect its populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. This responsibility entails the prevention of such crimes, including their incitement, through appropriate and necessary means. We accept that responsibility and will act in accordance with it. The international community should, as appropriate, encourage and help States to exercise this responsibility and support the United Nations in establishing an early warning capability.*

advocacy partnerships, (3) mobilizing private funds, (4) information and learning partnerships, and (5) operations.¹² Mobilization of private funds has had some well-known successes, notably Ted Turner's donation of \$1bn to the UN and Bill and Melinda Gates' donation of \$750m towards a vaccination program. A current example of MNC involvement in "operations" is the \$100 laptops project displayed at the UN net summit in Tunis. This is an example where a non-profit "association" of Massachusetts Institute of Technology and several MNC's, such as News Corporation and Google, has worked together, with the blessing of the United Nations (UN), to create a laptop with the aim of reducing the information gap. The "One Laptop Per Child Group" defies current organizational definitions – it is a blend of the multilateral, NGO, universities, and MNC's.¹³

Bull et al address the question of why multilateral organizations embrace participation by MNC's and claim that "Corporations are 'ahead of the curve,'"¹⁴ whereas multilateral institutions are often reactive. Collaboration with industry is welcomed, as seen with the One Laptop per Child initiative, in areas such as Information Technology to avoid a widening of the information gap. The UN in particular welcomes the resources MNC's can bring as it is in a continual funding crisis.

An additional reason is the shift in ideology that has occurred. Although the private sector has a history of working closely with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Labor Organization (ILO), Bull et al believe that the demonstration of neo-Marxist ideas in numerous UN bodies, such as the United Nations

¹² Bull, Benedicte, Boas, Morten & McNeil, Desmond (2004) *Private Sector Influence in the Multilateral system: A Changing Structure of World governance?* Global Governance, Vol. 10, pp. 482-483

¹³ British Broadcasting Corporation (2005) UN debut for \$100 laptop for poor [online] BBC News, Available from: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4445060.stm> [Accessed 17th November 2005]

¹⁴ Bull et al - 486

Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), has made MNC's view the "UN as a hostile place... alienating the private sector [MNC's] from significant parts of the UN operations."¹⁵ Neo-Marxist ideas have been superseded with neo-liberal ideology favoring involvement by the private sector and the support of privatization, thus legitimizing market-based solutions for global issues.

Finally, Kofi Annan is the first UN Secretary-General with a degree in a business discipline whose leadership has reinforced the partnership with MNC's:

*"The United Nations once dealt only with governments. By now we know that peace and prosperity cannot be achieved without partnerships involving governments, international organizations, the business community and civil society. In today's world, we depend on each other. **The business of the United Nations involves the businesses of the world** [emphasis added]."*¹⁶ (Kofi Annan, 1998)

A current trend noted by Virginia Haufler is that businesses are moving towards self-regulation in the form of voluntary standards and corporate codes of conduct. Instead of "hard" or formal law governing the behavior of MNC's, there is a body of "soft" law emerging in the form of self-regulation. States tend to join IGO's in the fear that not doing so might reduce their influence, the United Kingdom's decision to join the European Community in 1973 (now the European Union (EU)) is an example of this at the state level. Membership of IGO's also helps minimize expenses as the cost of complying with different regulations in different countries can be high. A similar reason to join or form organizations on the part of MNC's is leadership; some businesses see themselves as leaders in their fields and see taking an active role in self-regulation as

¹⁵ Bull - 484

¹⁶ Kofi Annan (1998) Press Release SG/SM/6448 [online] United Nations, Available from: <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/1998/19980130.SGSM6448.html> [Accessed 17th November 2005]

consolidating and legitimizing that position. The EU's active role in the Kyoto Protocol negotiations on climate change is seen as an example of this at the regional level.

Additional reasons MNC's are motivated to adopt self-regulation set out by Haufler are efficiency gains, improving or maintaining the corporation's reputation and resisting governmental regulation. Globalization and the speed with which information can be disseminated means that MNC's cannot afford adverse publicity. Government regulation is seen as a cost and not a benefit, as such, self-regulation gives freedom and autonomy for MNC's to operate and keeps governmental interference to a minimum. Self-regulation by multinational corporations is often given the title of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Critics of self-regulation argue that self-regulation means no regulation and that it lowers environmental and human rights standards.¹⁷ Others believe that the policy of liberal capitalism is a "code word" for American hegemony and freeing MNC's from regulation.¹⁸

The study of regimes may be a useful tool when trying to facilitate the behavior of MNC's which, to repeat the statement at the beginning of this paper, "defy control." The end of the Cold War and an increasingly complex, interdependent world has led to new ways of thinking and a search for new "lenses" with which to explain the world system. One theory that has come to the fore in recent decades is that of "regime theory" which builds on Stephen Krasner's definition whereby a regime "is a set of principles, norms, rules and procedures around which actors' expectations converge."¹⁹ Regimes help to limit and regularize behavior and how issues are resolved. Donald Pechala views

¹⁷ Haufler - 3

¹⁸ Martin Griffiths and Terry O'Callaghan *International Relations: The Key Concepts* 1st ed. London: Routledge, (2003) p. 128

¹⁹ Donald Puchala and Raymond Hopkins *International Regimes*, Edited by Krasner, Stephen D. 1983, Cambridge, Cornell University Press p. 61-62

regimes in terms of the political system and believes that with closer analysis one can discern a corresponding regime for the UN, USA and New York City.²⁰ Pechula examines food and colonialism in the context of regimes. It holds that a corresponding regime must exist in which MNC's operate.

Rules, declarations and laws are a useful starting point when examining regimes. In 1974, the UN Economic and Social Council established two permanent bodies to study multinationals: the Intergovernmental Commission on Transnational Corporations (ICTC) and the UN Center on Transnational Corporations. These bodies established a code of conduct which focused on creating information systems and researching the political, social, economic and legal effects of transnational's and strengthening the negotiating capacity of states to negotiate with MNC's. These bodies were also asked to come up with a proper definition of transnational corporations – an aim that was never achieved.²¹

These two commissions were set up under pressure from developing nations who felt they were being exploited by multinational corporations and is evidence of the growing power of developing nations or the “Global South.”²² Since the General Assembly at the UN is based on a “one nation, one vote” system, decolonization has drastically increased the voting power of developing nations. Special interest groups such as the G-77 represent their members through a voting bloc. The ICTC's most notable success at constraining the power of MNC's was in 1977 when it passed a resolution requesting the termination of MNC investment in South Africa, contributing to

²⁰ Pechula - 62

²¹ Bennett - 280

²² The “Global South” is a vague term as geographically speaking some countries, such as Haiti, are not based in the south. The global south essentially refers to the third world or developing nations.

the end of Apartheid in the country.²³ The vote was passed along north – south lines. The commission was later disbanded and its functions transferred to UNCTAD. Pechula asserts that regimes tend to become more formal as time progresses, the opposite is true with regard to the trade regime as a recent move toward freer trade led to a loosening of regulation of MNC's as Bennett and Oliver indicate: "courting rather than controlling MNC investment is now deemed essential."²⁴

Donald Pechula believes that within each regime there is a set of elites who are the practical actors within it. Depending on the structure of the MNC, the elite with the most influence remains with the chairman. One of the heroes of the documentary "The Corporation" is the Chairman of Interface Inc., the largest carpet manufacturer in the world. The Chairman was asked to speak about his company's environmental vision to customers after he had set up a working group to answer customer's environmental concerns. As research, he read Paul Hawken's "The Ecology of Commerce" and had an epiphany. Since then, Interface has reduced waste by 80%, water intake by 78%, greenhouse gas emission by 46%, energy consumption by 31% and intends to be 100% sustainable by 2020.²⁵ Despite the soft-law nature of MNC regulation, the behavior of Interface's Chairman was changed. MNC's are becoming a vital cog in the wheels of many global issues.

MNC's are concerned with perceptions and their public image and they are affected in the same way that states are "shamed" into complying with legislation through dissemination of information and reports by NGO's. In addition, NGO's provide the equivalent of sanctions by organizing boycotts of products, such as the Nestle boycott

²³ Bennett - 281

²⁴ Bennett - 282

²⁵ Michelle Conlin (2004) *From Plunderer to Protector*, Business Week, Issue 3892, pp. 60.

after its promotion of bottle-feeding was linked to infant deaths.²⁶ Such activities directly impinge in MNC's profits – the *raison d'être* of corporations.

Shaming nations and framing the debate in emotive language is a well-established practice by activists, a renowned example being the reframing of female circumcision as “mutilation” and as violence against women.²⁷ However, Elizabeth Chitty contends that framing the debate in emotive language and in terms of human rights should not be the only method by which MNC's are persuaded to act and suggests that “critics of MNC's must learn to speak the language of their audience... [and that MNC's predominantly speak in terms of]...costs, productivity, and profits.”²⁸ In responding to the AIDS crisis, activists have tried to engage and encourage MNC's to act by framing the debate in such emotive language. In response to the enhanced power that MNC's now wield in global affairs, the UN appealed to MNC's to “strengthen the response to HIV/AIDS in the world of work by establishing and implementing prevention and care programmes in public, private and informal work sectors....”²⁹ Chitty contends that the debate should be moved away from that based on the current framework of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) espousing human rights principles, towards one of a global workforce crisis, where HIV/AIDS is causing a crisis in the workforce, and that any moral or philosophical arguments should be set aside.

A common criticism of the existing framework of self-regulation is that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is soft law, the targets set by CSR are voluntary and no

²⁶ Margaret E Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1998, p. 21

²⁷ Keck et al - 20

²⁸ Elizabeth M. Chitty. (2005) *Reframing the Issue: AIDS as a Global Workforce Crisis and the Emerging Role of Multinational Corporations*, Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies, Vol. 12 Issue 2, p718

²⁹ *Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS*, G.A. Res. S-26/2, U.N. GAOR, 26th Special Sess., Agenda Item 8, at 7, U.N. Doc. A/RES/S-26/2 IN Chitty - 719

enforcement mechanism exists to ensure compliance. Chitty argues that the AIDS epidemic increases costs for corporations as employee turnover, health care (for those MNC's that provide it) and training costs are higher with the result being a lower-skilled workforce, decreased productivity and declining profits. Intervention then becomes a cost-effective policy.

Not only do MNC's have a responsibility to respond to the AIDS epidemic due to their influence and power in the world, doing so is in their own interest. Moreover, MNC's are in the most effective position to respond. Unlike non-profit-making NGO's many MNC's, such as Coca-Cola, already have sophisticated distribution channels which can be used to effectively deliver information and services. Indeed Coca-Cola's distribution network has already been used to send information to several African regions and Shell provided information about AIDS at its petrol pumps.³⁰

What Elizabeth Chitty is proposing is a mixture between framing the debate in a more focused manner and Mitchell's "regime design matters." Mitchell examines regimes from the standpoint of how to make treaties more effective by achieving greater compliance and realizing goals.³¹ In his paper he found that greater compliance was achieved through equipment purchases and independent auditing rather than through self-regulation. By changing the regime so that compliance can be achieved, the effectiveness of the current system of good intentions and soft law via CSR may achieve greater compliance and be improved by tackling the AIDS epidemic with a reframing of the debate and this alternative approach.

³⁰ Chitty - 736

³¹ Ronald B. Mitchell (1994) "Regime Design Matters: Intentional Oil Pollution and Treaty Compliance" IN International Organization: Vol. 48: No. 3

Multinational corporations may contribute to peace and stability. Russett and O'Neal, building on the renowned work of Michael Doyle's democratic peace theory (whereby democracies tend not to go to war with each other), assert that international organizations also reduce conflict. Since the end of the Cold War many new democracies have come about. Doyle's theory has been reinforced by a recent report which claims the number of conflicts has decreased by 40% since 1992.³²

Russett and O'Neal claim it is not just democracy per se that encourages peace and stability but that Intergovernmental Organizations and economic interdependence also play an integral role. If two countries are members of the same IGO's they tend to be more peaceful. If a country scores well in the three areas of Russett and O'Neal's peace triangle of international organizations, democracy and economic interdependence, the chances of conflict are reduced by more than 70%.³³

Prior to the collapse of the Soviet system, the communist and capitalist countries traded within their own spheres. Since the end of the cold war many new states have come into existence, established democracies and joined IGO's; more importantly, these states have started trading with the world. Democracy is given the credit for creating a peaceful world system, but it is the IGO's that promote democracy in the world and the trading activities of MNC's that are the key contributors of peace and stability.

Peace and stability through trade can be seen throughout history. Colonialism began with trade over the Asian spice route. People saw that a trader was much more

³² Edith Lederer (2005) U.N.: Conflicts Down 40 Pct. Since 1992 [online] Human Security Report, Available from: <http://www.humansecurityreport.info/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=114> [Accessed 17th November 2005]

³³ Bruce Russett and John R. Oneal. International Organizations Also Reduce Conflict, IN: *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* 2001, Norton and Company, New York, p. 172

productive than a soldier. After the Congress of Vienna in 1815 established the Concert of Europe and the balance of power system, Europe experienced almost a century of peace and stability, with the one exception of the Crimean War in 1854. A key factor in creating peace and stability in Europe was that competition between the European states had been transformed by the industrial revolution and colonial expansion into a race to have influence and rule world trade – business enterprises abroad meant peace and stability at home. In addition, the formation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995 (replacing GATT) states now have a peaceful means of settling trade disputes and no longer need to resort to war. The WTO, a specialized agency of the UN, is one of the few IGO's with a dispute settlement system which acts as an enforcement mechanism.

Paul Bracken believes that domestic corporations are flourishing and are beginning to compete against the large multinationals. In addition, corporations are beginning to act like ambassadors; “countries are now seeing their global corporations in broader terms, such as the image they convey about their country and its capacities.”³⁴ Despite the rise of domestic and international corporations, Bracken still believes that “in any showdown of power...government invariably wins because it possesses a monopoly on the legitimate use of force.”³⁵ While this may be true in relatively strong developed countries like the USA, developing nations are not in such a powerful position. This is especially true in the case of multinational corporations as any country that tries to act independently “risks disinvestment, capital flight, and recession.”³⁶

Bennett et al claim that MNC's “defy control” must not be used as justification for leaving multinational corporations to govern themselves. This paper has shown that

³⁴ Bracken - 59

³⁵ Bracken - 61

³⁶ Griffiths - 127

the world has and is radically changing with power shifting into the hands of multinational corporations. Multinational corporations can no longer be viewed solely as profit-making entities. Power and influence also bring responsibilities. In a world of gross inequalities the international community must work with MNC's to make the best of the situation. In addition to the five areas where MNC participation has increased as set out by Bull et al,³⁷ the following recommendations outline some of the ways MNC participation may be expanded:

Co-opt the specialized practices of entering new-markets. Julie Mertus discusses the international community's response in Kosovo. One of the failings of United Nations administrators identified by the author was not listening or taking into account the local experts' concerns over the new Kosovan constitution.³⁸ Successful MNC's when entering new territories have developed highly specialized skills at learning about the local culture and collaborating with officials in those countries, in fact, an entire industry has developed out of it, known as international corporate communication. Though evidently difficult in the aftermath of the Kosovan conflict, knowledge and practices of integrating into a new market may hold useful lessons for internationals.

Co-opt MNC's highly developed communication methods. Keck and Sikkink discuss methods of effective delivery of information by non-governmental organizations. By framing the issues and using evocative language. The authors give the example of terming female circumcision as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and "violence against women" in order to restate that FGM violates human rights. A second method is by telling a story, finding a mother who has experienced FGM and doesn't want her

³⁷ See pages 6 and 7 for an outline of the 5 areas.

³⁸ Julie Mertus (2004) "Improving International Peacebuilding Efforts: The Example of Human Rights Culture in Kosovo" IN Global Governance 10, p. 339

daughter to go through the same by sentimental education and by providing information. MNC's have a highly developed expertise in marketing, advertising and public relations creating targeted communications for a specific audience, they have the contacts (sometimes in-house departments) and expertise to create communications that are targeted to specific audiences, with an effective message conveyed in the most effective manner. MNC's can work with NGO's to communicate important human rights and health messages in the most cost-efficient and successful manner.

Whilst there are disadvantages with increased MNC participation, such as the loss of control or sovereignty by national governments and the focus being on issues relevant to MNC's, the increased importance of multinational organizations must be recognized. Steps must be taken to facilitate and encourage MNC's to support international initiatives and to conduct business in a globally responsible manner.

It is the role of national governments and civil society to encourage MNC's to embrace these responsibilities. Indeed, many MNC's, as seen in this paper, are eager to get involved. It is time for political scientists to actively expand the study of international organizations to include this powerful organizational grouping. If MNC's are willing and able to fill the funding and resource voids in tackling global issues then the international community needs to pragmatically embrace participation.

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