

## Statement to the United Nations Global Compact

*The RING is an established global alliance of research and policy organisations that seeks to enhance and promote sustainable development through a programme of collaborative research, dissemination and policy advocacy*

July 20, 2000

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## Summary RING Statement for the UN Global Compact

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This is a statement on behalf of the RING – a global alliance of predominantly Southern policy research institutes that supports sustainable development through collaborative research and policy advice. We advocate the assessment of policies in terms of their implications for the “livelihood economy” – economic activity, often informally organised, using local resources and low levels of energy and material inputs. Our work therefore seeks to link grassroots communities with national and global policy makers, governments with a broader array of stakeholders, and researchers in different regions with each other. The core institutions of the RING are BCAS (Bangladesh), DA (India), ENDA (Senegal), IIED (UK), IIED-AL (Argentina), NEST (Nigeria), SDPI (Pakistan), SEI (US and Sweden), and ZERO (Zimbabwe).

The RING applauds the Secretary General’s bold initiative to establish a global partnership between the UN, governments, businesses, and NGOs and other civil society institutions. We have long advocated a partnership approach at national levels and welcome the innovative extension of the idea to the global domain. Besides this, the GC fills a major lacuna in the discussions and evolution of global governance by asserting the significance of corporate implementation of a set of universally accepted principles for human rights, labour and environment. We are especially appreciative of the attention that the GC has drawn to core ethical values, values without which no system of governance can be viable or sustainable.

Over the past decade, RING members have built up considerable experience in the difficult task of translating principles into practice, working with companies, governments and civil society organisations, to carry out the operational tasks involved in marrying good corporate practice with social justice and environmental regeneration. (*Ref. Box 1, page 7, for a brief summary of some of these activities*).

The GC comes at a time of turmoil in the world economy, which risks widening the gulf between rich and poor, between North and South and between aspirations for a more just and sustainable future and market realities. Across the globe, the RING has observed a growing divide between the corporate economy and the livelihood economy that sustains the bulk of the world’s people. The challenge facing the GC is how to ensure that the financial, technological and institutional assets of the corporate economy are turned to the advantage of those people excluded from globalisation.

The RING visualises the GC as an inclusive, participatory, and transparent process, which is open to a wide range of stakeholder communities. Its core values are sufficiently broad to subsume concerns of global equity, poverty eradication, sustainable development, and sustainable livelihoods. It strengthens rather than blurs or dilutes the roles of different stakeholders: governments and inter-governmental organisations for social protection and regulation; business for entrepreneurship and economic progress; and civil society for identifying problems, opportunities, and solutions.

We are also acutely aware of the fact that global inequality and poverty has increased in the last half-century despite the unprecedented dynamism of the global corporate economy. As currently structured the global economy cannot eradicate poverty, build local capacity, or enable local control of resources and decisions. From a livelihood perspective, therefore, while the partnership with the corporate economy is both timely and valuable, it is equally critical for the GC to forge a partnership with the livelihood economy. This can be done by

supporting institutions that build the capacities of poor biomass-dependent communities to withstand shocks, overcome obstacles, protect and expand their assets, and halt and reverse the drain of resources.

The process stimulated by the GC must extend beyond global standards which only create uniformity amongst large organisations but which do not guarantee that the capacity of the livelihood economy would be enhanced. It will be critical to root the implementation of the GC's universal values in local realities and contexts, opening this up to community participation and involvement, which in turn feeds back into the global process of standard-setting.

The RING institutions are keen to support the GC in a number of ways:

- brokering policy dialogues and creating practical tools for shaping a corporate citizenship that enhances and is supportive of sustainable livelihoods;
- facilitating ways in which corporations can contribute to sustainable livelihoods through partnerships and consortia;
- supporting the development of locally rooted mechanisms for implementation;
- undertaking impact assessment of policy choices;
- building local capacity for participation, monitoring, mobilisation of technical and financial resources, rights protection, and definition of standards.

At the threshold both of a new millennium and a new planetary phase of civilisation, it is our responsibility to define a bold vision for human society. We believe that the GC responds precisely to this challenge, and we are proud to endorse and support it.

## Background

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The **Regional and International Networking Group (RING)** is a global alliance of predominantly Southern independent research and policy organisations. It was formed in 1991 to stimulate preparations for the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. As part of a co-ordinated programme of activities, each RING member prepared national sustainable development reports to complement their own government's contributions, and a number of RING institutions were represented in their government's national Earth Summit delegations.

In 1994 the group designed and implemented an on-going programme of capacity development, 'pooled' and collaborative research (at both regional and international levels), with the goal of creating a unique and influential platform for international, comparative policy research, action and advocacy. With an emphasis on South-South and South-North collaboration, the RING aimed to improve environment and development policy formulation processes, and to increase the regional and local impact of organisations working on sustainable development issues.

Following an initial focus on strategic development and planning within the individual organisations, the RING network moved on to consolidate its regional bi-lateral exchanges and 'pooled research', and developed a collaborative research programme around common priority themes. These included (1) Water and People, (2) Sustainable Livelihoods (including People's technologies), (3) Multilateral Environmental Agreements (in particular, Climate Change & Desertification), (4) Trade and Environment, and (5) RING Research and Policy Impacts.

The RING network has now established a strong degree of internal trust and friendship, and created a solid foundation upon which to build future collaboration. It is the only network of its kind involved in a structured programme of collaborative research and policy advocacy. A complementary and harmonious approach to sustainable development issues has been achieved through close co-operation, 'knowledge exchange' and the sharing of ideas and experiences. The RING is now a known and established network in the field, and has developed an international reputation of excellence.

Currently, members of the RING are Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS) in Bangladesh, Development Alternatives in India, Environnement et Développement du Tiers-Monde (ENDA) in Senegal, International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) in the UK, IIED-AL in Argentina, Nigeria Environmental Study Action Team (NEST) in Nigeria, Stockholm Environment Institute - Boston Center (SEI-Boston) in the USA, Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) in Pakistan, and Zimbabwe Energy Research Organisation (ZERO) in Zimbabwe.

## **RING and the UN Global Compact**

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The RING has become engaged with the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan's Global Compact through the process outlined below.

As part of a UNEP contracted effort, under the umbrella of the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), the Ring was identified as the appropriate network of environment-development NGOs to engage with Kofi Annan's Global Compact. This proposal was greeted enthusiastically by RING members at the Sixth International RING meeting held in Delhi, in March 2000.

Following this meeting, IIED recommended to the UN office that the RING was interested and keen to engage with the Global Compact. In order to formalise that engagement Viv Davies (IIED External Relations Co-ordinator and RING Co-ordinator) and Adil Najam (RING Research Consultant) attended the preliminary GC meeting at the UN in May, 2000.

The Secretary General's office was enthused by the potential of the RING involvement - particularly in relation to its Southern element, which was distinctly lacking from the Compact. Whilst it was clear from that meeting that NGOs and Labour organisations were not expected to 'sign up' to the GC in the same way that businesses would, the RING nevertheless offered to prepare an outline framework of how it could most practically serve the needs of the Global Compact.

A meeting of RING representatives, held in July, to discuss and formalise the RING's approach to the GC, centred around the content of a draft RING 'statement' for presentation at the 26 July meeting, and a longer RING paper which would outline the RING's most effective input to the GC. From notes of these discussions, Dr. Tariq Banuri subsequently developed each of these papers. Prior to the two RING papers being presented to the Global Compact and/or distributed more widely, they have each been circulated to all RING organisations for agreement and approval as RING documents by each organisation's most senior representative.

It was decided that Nigel Cross, Tariq Banuri and Youba Sokona would jointly represent the RING at the 26 July GC meeting (whilst Nigel Cross would also be representing IIED, as UNEP contract signatory). Funds to support the participation of RING partners and subsequent development of a RING/GC proposal were drawn from the IIED/UNEP contract.

### Box 1: Some examples of RING activities in collaboration with the private sector

- **BCAS** in Bangladesh has assessed the social and environmental impacts of trade in garments, shrimps and leather, carried out a dialogue with industry on pollution in the Kaliakor region and advised the textile industry on a national code of practice.
- **DA** in India has been a pioneer in the design of environmental and social reporting procedures for corporations. It has also developed cleaner production techniques for SMEs, and undertaken a social assessment of the management plan of the Barang Coal Mining project.
- **ENDA** in Senegal brokers dialogue between researchers, NGOs and the private sector. Its research helped develop the use of biomass fibres in the large scale marketing of packaging, and in the transformation of agricultural waste. ENDA is instrumental in bringing together multi-stakeholders in initiatives linked to the UN Convention on Climate Change, it has also devised strategies to support the private sector in marketing solar home systems.
- **IIED-AL** in Argentina has had extensive experience in policy research and policy dialogues in partnership with the private sector, including research into: private sector participation in water and sanitation (balancing economic, social and environmental goals); opportunities for a multi-utility approach towards sustainability in low income settlements (water/sanitation/energy/waste); policy dialogues on maximising the impact of public-private partnerships on water and sanitation in Latin America; trade liberalisation and sustainability.
- **IIED** in the UK has pioneered a number of initiatives on business and sustainable development. *Towards a Sustainable Paper Cycle* project was the first global assessment of how sustainable development could be achieved in a particular industry sector. IIED is now managing the *Mining, Minerals and Sustainable Development* project for the WBCSD. Other major initiatives include extensive work on forest certification, market analysis in relation to supporting sustainable agriculture and rural livelihoods, and the development of a new Sustainable Markets Group at IIED.
- **NEST** in Nigeria has acted as broker and facilitator for the private sector and is currently involved in the *Green Cheque Initiative* which is designed to promote and develop environmentally responsible business practices.
- **SDPI** in Pakistan has carried out research on sustainability in the clothing and leather sectors, organised business-government roundtable meetings, and provided training, information and advisory services to industry.
- **SEI-Boston** has a deep-rooted interest in promoting socially and environmentally responsible business. It also has a close involvement with the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) established in 1997 with the mission of designing globally applicable guidelines for preparing reports on the environmental, social, and economic impact of corporate activities.

## **Full RING Statement for the UN Global Compact**

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### **1. The RING**

The RING is an expanding network - as well as a network of networks - of institutes that seek to promote sustainable development through collaborative research, advice and action. Each institution has extensive networking links with other civil society institutions in its region. The group brings a pro-poor perspective to the issues at hand, a perspective that is shaped by the engagement with poor and marginalized groups and local communities. It assesses policies and initiatives in terms of their ability to enhance or obstruct the coping and adaptive strategies of these communities.

A central goal of the RING is to ensure that international policy making and institutions are informed and influenced by local realities, and are hence supportive and enabling of local action and sustainable livelihoods. To this end, it seeks to link grassroots communities with national and global policy makers, governments with a broader array of stakeholders, and researchers in different regions (including North and South) with each other.

### **2. The RING's view of the Global Compact (GC)**

The RING applauds the Secretary General's bold initiative to establish a broad based partnership between the UN, national governments, NGOs, other civil society institutions, and businesses. Such a partnership is needed to ensure not only that emerging institutions of global governance are based on fundamental principles of justice and equity, but also that the pursuit of sustainable human development is fostered at the global level. Only by underscoring core values – the respect for human rights, labour rights and the environment – can global decision making overcome its current, exclusively instrumental orientation. Similarly, the centrality accorded to the principle of partnership between different stakeholders is essential if globalization is ever to become a responsible and equitable process.

In endorsing the nine principles of the GC, the RING stresses the importance on the one hand of local realities and local processes, and on the other hand of complete 'buy-in' rather than piecemeal selection. The challenge is not only to secure commitment to the core principles, but also and far more importantly to understand how they would be prioritised in concrete situations. The integration of the principles would equate with a model for sustainable development only if local realities and the local context of corporate responsibility are considered as the priority.

Concretely, the RING would like to see more emphasis within the Global Compact on the issue of poverty and sustainable livelihoods, as this is currently absent from the business focus and objectives. We would also like to encourage more consideration for issues of privatisation, distribution and their effects on poverty and equity. The RING invites business to help in creating solutions to the above concerns.

Finally, the RING would encourage particular attention to addressing the doubts that have been expressed regarding this initiative, and especially in placing the initiative within the global context. We would also like to advise an expansion of the standards setting process to include local as well as global standards. All of these point to the need for capacity building and institutional development.

### **3. Main Concerns**

Members of the RING are aware and sympathetic of the warnings of many independent thinkers from the North as well as the South. Some have cautioned against the initiative becoming an exclusive partnership between global elites. Such partnerships reinforce the very patterns of social exclusion that a global compact needs to overcome. By blurring the roles and responsibilities of the different partners, they undermine the already weakened system of social responsibility while marginalizing livelihood economies.

The challenge facing the GC is how to ensure that the financial, technological and institutional assets of the corporate economy are turned to the advantage of those people excluded from the globalisation process.

In order to fully realise its potential, the GC must become an inclusive, participatory, and transparent process, open to a broader set of stakeholder communities and embracing a larger set of core values. Its core values subsume the concerns of global equity, poverty eradication, sustainable development, and sustainable livelihoods. Its membership has to be open to groups outside the formal, corporate sector. Its analysis must incorporate the concerns and the situations of such groups, for example, by ensuring that decent work includes decent livelihoods, human rights encompass human security, and environmental rights give priority to the local control of natural resources. The legitimacy provided through this process to the corporate economy should not come at the cost of the further marginalization of the livelihood economy. It must place more emphasis on developing a shared sense of outcome between the stakeholders involved.

Furthermore, the partnership envisaged here need not lead to a blurring or dilution of the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders. Governments and inter-governmental organisations should continue to accept the responsibility for social protection, monitoring, regulation, and environmental conservation; and civil society actors (including NGOs, unions, peoples' movements, and the media) for identifying problems, opportunities, and solutions.

### **4. A Pro-poor Perspective**

The context within which the GC needs to be assessed is that of globalization. While there are controversies over the nature, meaning, and even the validity of the term globalization, most observers (including RING researchers) define it narrowly to mean that an increasing proportion of public policy decisions are being made at the global level, and in all likelihood will continue to be so made in the foreseeable future.

Most analyses of globalization have been criticised for being rooted in the concerns and needs of global actors – transnational corporations, inter-governmental bodies, multilateral financial institutions, international non-government organisations, and de-contextualized scholarship. A growing literature, however, views it from the perspective of marginalized and poor local communities. This literature points to the increasing degree of global economic inequality, and especially the persistent and growing inequality in power that it hides.

From the perspectives of those who work with the poor, the challenge is not to subsidise them or provide them with charity, but to ensure that national and global institutions and policies

support rather than obstruct their strategies and enhance rather than drain their assets. The challenge is to strengthen the individual and collective capacities of the poor to protect and deploy their resources and assets. Existing arrangements and systems often militate against these goals.

A significant consequence is the emergence at the global level of what the development literature dubbed a 'dual economy'. This refers to the simultaneous co-existence of two unconnected (or weakly connected) economic configurations. On the one hand is the corporate economy, which is global in character and reach, highly organised, economically efficient, entrepreneurial and dynamic, but dependent on a high and growing consumption of materials and energy inputs. On the other hand is the livelihood economy, based on local resources, organised informally and using low levels of energy and material inputs. Indeed, the global system helps channel human, natural, and financial resources from the latter to the former. Responses have to be judged in terms of their ability to halt and reverse these flows. These concerns are often absent from the magisterial narratives of globalization.

## **5. GC and the Challenge of Global Governance**

It is well to keep in mind that current analyses and descriptions of globalization resemble the historical narratives of nationalism insofar as they are stimulated by the awareness of increasing economic and social interdependence, and consequently by the need for establishing appropriate social and political institutions. However, the two narratives differ in one key respect. Discussions of globalization have concentrated mainly on instrumental or performance concerns (especially aggregate global economic growth). While these were important in the earlier discussions on nationalism, they were generally subsumed within the broader rubric of foundational or value-based concerns (such as justice, equity, and decency). The great successes of our times – the institutionalisation of democratic governance, the civil rights movement and the dismantling of apartheid, the ending of colonialism, the campaign for the rights of women – would have been inconceivable otherwise.

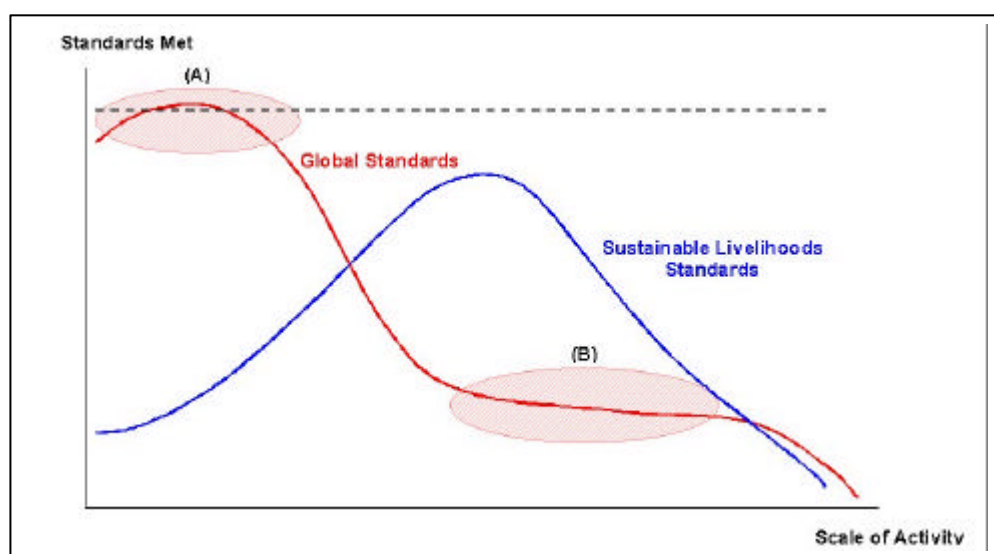
Today, as we stand not only at the threshold of a new millennium but of a new planetary phase of civilisation, global discussions are in danger of becoming devoid of values and foundational concerns. Global society is conceptualised increasingly as an instrumental regime dominated by the neoliberal agenda of free markets and economic efficiency.

The missing elements are precisely those needed to begin the process of developing democratic institutions at the global level. Sound governance is vital, and we believe that good global governance, which embraces both equity and efficiency, needs to be approached from the perspective of values and institutions. In their absence, we witness the piecemeal fabrication of a system of global governance – in the form of interlocking global regimes of trade, finance, security, and control of natural resources – yet devoid of considerations of justice, equity, and decency, which have formed the backbone of all well-functioning systems of governance. Indeed, it has been virtually impossible to create space for the concerns of equity, sustainability, and development into these discussions. If the GC succeeds in nothing else other than the re-introducing these fundamental considerations into global discussions, it will be a resounding success.

## 6. Global and Local Standards

While the encouragement to the corporate sector to assume the responsibility for self-monitoring of social and environmental impacts is very timely, it needs to be remembered that the corporate economy has not and cannot resolve the issues of poverty eradication, local capacity development, and local control of resources and decisions. The Secretary General's report has shown how global inequality and poverty have increased in the last half century despite unprecedented growth in income. Indeed, the phenomenal success of the corporate economy is mirrored in the diversion of natural and human resources from biomass-based livelihood economies.

There is also a weakness in terms of monitoring of standards that are most relevant to the promotion of sustainable development and the enhancement of sustainable livelihoods. In fact, if one views the relationship between the global dispersion of economic activities and global standards, a small number of institutions would appear to have the capacity to adhere to existing or higher global standards (ref 'A' in the figure below), while a large number would be bunched near the bottom of the ranking (ref 'B' in the figure below). The standard setting processes currently under way appear to be designed to induce the first group to become more uniform in its adherence to such standards. However, it has the danger of leaving a larger number of institutions either to languish at lower standards or be squeezed out by regulatory pressures. In our view, it is an equally important goal to create the capacity in the second group to adopt such standards.



However, there is another, and from our perspective, more profound problem. This is that if the same array of global economic activities is judged in terms of their relevance and implication for local concerns – namely the enhancement of sustainable livelihoods, support for coping and adaptation strategies, reduction of vulnerability – the ranking turns out to be quite different and in many ways the mirror image of the first ranking. In these terms, it is the smaller, informal sector activities that provide the greatest succour to local communities, while the activities of larger organisations often increase rather than lower the vulnerability of these groups to unanticipated shocks.

In order to address this, the RING recommends that the Global Compact encourages the identification of appropriate and mutually acceptable systems of monitoring and verification – including both global and local standards. In addition, it should work towards defining the role and meaning of ‘best practice’ and ensure via peer review that the promotion of best practice is encouraged and seen as a central component to the GC. We encourage the GC to help initiate a process in which the highest standards are adopted at local levels – i.e. a ‘race to the top’, where the top is negotiated and defined locally.

## **7. The RING Agenda**

The GC agenda must include a support for institutions, organisations, and structures that can channel resources back into the livelihood economy, and generally enhance the capacities of poor biomass-dependent communities to protect and expand their assets. It must make a special effort in support of marginalized groups and focus on defining the appropriate ‘exchange rate’ between the corporate and livelihood economies.

**Impact Assessment:** A critical evaluation of the mass of analysis on the relationship between globalization and poverty and the environment, including an institutional analysis of the current governance frameworks and options for improvement. This would include ground-truthing sustainable development by showing how particular sectors and places have been affected positively and negatively both by corporate globalization and other types of international inter-connection.

**Standards-setting:** Continue the partnership with the private sector to push forward the boundaries of what is expected, without being blind to the continuing needs for regulation and social controls on concentration of market power. In particular, expand the notion of standards to embrace local as well as global perspectives. In supporting the GC and in pursuit of practical solutions to real problems, the emphasis for the RING will be placed on local level capacity strengthening, especially in terms of monitoring, technical and financial capacity, rights protection, and definition of standards. Whilst the need for standards is imperative, the need for capacity building at the local level is vital.

**Linking the Corporate and Livelihood Economies:** Given the need for an equitable, efficient and sustainable global economy and a much bolstered local livelihoods economy, it is essential to explore the linkages between the two. The RING will strive to ensure appropriate institutions, governance and accountability at all levels, with particular consideration for livelihoods and impacts upon the poor.

***In sum, the RING will work towards brokering policy dialogues and creating practical tools for shaping a corporate citizenship that enhances and is supportive of sustainable livelihoods.***

## Annex: Ring Contacts 2000

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