

Remarks of Jim Baker, Co-ordinator, Council of Global Unions, to the Global Compact Local Networks Forum

(Monterrey, Mexico, 18 October 2007)

Thank you for the invitation to participate in the forum. I have learned a lot over these last two days. Among other things, I have learned that I am old, or at least, old fashioned.

I thought that the Global Compact was about people coming together to advance the Global Compact principles. But, I have learned that it is about filling out forms.

I confess to feeling lost in some of these discussions. Most trade unionists and some employers, come to these issues with a traditional, industrial relations perspective. Our instinct is to sit down, eye to eye, and act to solve problems, reach agreement and change things rather than just buying into anonymous, “off-the-shelf”, “one-size-fits all” systems.

I cannot recall any situation where such discussions or negotiations have had as a goal proving the virtue of companies. Rather, social dialogue, most importantly in the form of collective bargaining, assumes that companies and trade unions are human institutions and can, therefore, make mistakes. They engage in a “private, voluntary initiatives” in order to set down some agreed rules and use them to make progress on the assumption that problems will inevitably arise.

That process has proven itself over the decades at national and local levels. In that same spirit, an early form of industrial relations is emerging at the international level. Many multinational companies are recognising and working with Global Union Federations. Coca Cola, in spite of the complexity of their business operations, as we learned yesterday, is one such company. Some have signed international framework agreements. At the time that the Global Compact was launched, there were five or six such agreements. Now, there are over fifty of them and a full-fledged, detailed, global, collective bargaining agreement of an association of ship-owners and ship-managers with the International Transport Workers’ Federation. I would like to believe that the Global Compact has stimulated this explosion of social dialogue, but it does not appear to have even been relevant to it.

We entered into the Global Compact because we saw it as a global dialogue opportunity. We felt that such dialogue was needed to address many aspects of global integration in the light of the Global Compact principles. The principles were always coupled with a commitment to engage in dialogue.

Some of you may not understand the trade union status in the Compact - why trade unions are not just lumped together with NGOs (or with what are described, often inaccurately, as “civil society organisations”), Trade unions are, at the same time, part of industry and part of civil society – economic and political actors. Or, as Kofi Annan said, “it is not just executives who represent companies”.

The Global Compact was intended to be “dialogue” driven. That was its special feature or, if you prefer, its “comparative advantage” over the proliferation of CSR initiatives. It was supposed to be more relevant to how the world really works, more practical, and more

effective because it was based on engagement of the real actors in the global economy and community.

What is different and what is common among the ten Global Compact principles? The simplest way to compare the differences may be to look at social and environmental issues.

Let's look at trees, important contributors to the global ecosystem and to the fight against global warming. They cannot protect themselves. They are living, but are not capable of defining or articulating their own interests. We, humankind, have no choice but to act on their behalf.

On the other hand, what workers need, above all else, is the right to organise so that they can define, articulate, and defend their own interests. They are not mute, unless silenced by fear. And yet, the CSR industry often sees workers as if they were trees; with futures that must or should depend on the good will and "responsibility" of outsiders - on "the kindness of strangers".

What do all of the ten Global Compact principles have in common? They are all about rule of law and governance.

How can human rights be respected without rule of law, due process, and an independent judiciary? Can the Global Compact seriously deal with human rights violations if people are subject to arbitrary arrest, detention, torture, or assassination, many thousands of whom have been trade unionists? Isn't that governance?

The rights of workers, including the enabling rights to organise and to bargain, must be protected by government if they are to be fully respected by private parties. Not all workers are employed by multinational enterprises or in their supply chains, in fact they are relatively few. Even if 100% of companies were willing and able to insist on full respect of workers' rights, that would not help them. There is no substitute for good laws and good enforcement by labour inspection and the courts. Isn't that governance?

Will we be able to make the urgent changes necessary to sustain life on this planet with targets and technologies alone? Don't citizens need to be free to force governments to clean up their act? And, isn't that governance?

The tenth principle, on corruption, is obviously about rule of law and governance, but no more than the other nine.

Is our job, is the mission of the Global Compact, simply to endeavour to create isolated, private islands where people aren't tortured, where workers are not dismissed for forming trade unions, where industrial waste is not dumped and bribes not paid? It is important and worth doing, but is it enough? Shouldn't we be more ambitious?

If we want to use the Global Compact to make a real and sustainable difference for people and for the world in which we live, we should go back to the future, to a compact of social forces that is a catalyst of change. Its power comes from bringing together people and organisations, particularly representative and legitimate, global and national ones like the International Trade Union Confederation, the Global Union Federations, and the International Organisation of Employers.

We share certain common values, those represented by the ten Global Compact principles. We have our differences. But, we all have a common interest in the rule of law, in democracy, and in governance and we should not be shy about saying it.

Why don't we resist the siren songs and the clamour of various diversions and sideshows and get serious? Working together, we can deepen the roots and practice of democracy and governance. We can help to build the kind of decent, fair and sustainable societies that we all seek.