CHILDREN AT THE RIO+20 CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY FORUM

Two decades ago at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, twelve-year-old Severn Suzuki reminded world leaders: “Do not forget why you are attending these conferences, who you are doing this for – we are your own children. You are deciding what kind of a world we will grow up in.”

The follow-up to the Earth Summit, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) took place in Brazil on 20-22 June 2012 and concluded a two-year negotiation process by adopting the outcome document, ‘The Future We Want’.

For many who participated in Rio+20, the highlight was the collection of partnerships and other ‘coalitions of the willing’ that were formed at the margins of the Conference. And business was a key player, through both the UN Global Compact’s Rio+20 Corporate Sustainability Forum and the Business Action for Sustainable Development meetings. Thousands of progressive business leaders were present in Rio, sending a strong message that business is key to achieving the ‘future we want’. Businesses are a strong driving force behind sustainability and want to be engaged in developing the post-2015 development agenda and sustainable development goals.

So where were children in the corporate sustainability agenda at Rio?

Children’s rights and business truly came of age in Rio and were featured prominently through both a dedicated session at the Corporate Sustainability Forum and the Forum’s own outcome document.

The event, ‘Children and Business: Making the Connection for Sustainability’, presented the newly-released Children’s Rights and Business Principles. Moderated by Jo Confino, Executive Editor of Guardian Sustainable Business, and presided over by Her Majesty, Queen Silvia of Sweden, the session featured business executives Greg Priest, Head of Sustainability Policy and Compliance at IKEA Group; Susanne Stormer, Vice President of Corporate Sustainability at Novo Nordisk; Cecilia Rena, Sustainability Strategies Manager of Arcor Group; and Jeroo Billimoria, founder and Managing Director of Child and Youth Finance International.

Her Majesty, Queen Silvia of Sweden, noted in the opening remarks, “Business, whether small or large, will affect children both directly and indirectly… Business can influence social and environmental conditions positively for children through business practise. The Children’s Rights and Business Principles give business guidance in this regards.”

The panellists challenged traditional views of business’ impact on children to explore how all business activity and relationships in the workplace, marketplace, community and environment affect children.

Susanne Stormer from Novo Nordisk spoke of what children’s rights mean for a pharmaceutical company that produces diabetes medication. She noted that for them, respecting children’s rights as articulated in the first Principle means respecting a child’s
right to health, which is inextricably linked with their core product and business model. Providing available medicines is key, but making them accessible regardless of where people live or how much they can afford to pay is also critical. In tackling a disease where 90 per cent of cases are preventable, this holistic approach to health and wellbeing also includes promoting early screening and supporting lifestyle interventions. Because the first 1000 days of a child’s life can determine whether they will lead a healthy life, the company works with men and women during pregnancy and as parents to convey how lifestyle will affect the health of their child.

While stating that “it seems evident to everybody in this room that you must respect children’s rights”, Susanne Stormer also highlighted the business case for diabetes prevention: “This is not just about promoting what we should not do. This is a business opportunity. So if you have so many people who are under-treated [for diabetes], under-diagnosed, who do not have access to treatment; then there is also a business proposition, a business opportunity to go with that.” Susanne’s remarks illustrate how focusing on the needs of those at the ‘bottom of the pyramid’ can challenge businesses to realize inclusive markets; and develop innovative and affordable solutions for children and families in low income households.

Marketing and advertising to children was another key point of discussion; for example using children as pressure points with parents. How can business communicate responsibly with children and young people as consumers? Suggested initiatives focused on minimum age restrictions for advertising, or limiting the use of children’s cartoon characters.

The debate explored other business actions in the marketplace – for example, how businesses can consider respecting and supporting children’s rights in the development of their core products. Within the food and beverage industry, considerations include changing the portfolio of products to increase nutritious options for children. Cecilia Rena of Arcor, an Argentinian confectioners and food company noted, “We are working in promoting healthy lifestyles, healthy habits on the one hand; and on the other hand, we are also working in improving the nutritional profile of our products.”

By developing financial products for children, the banking sector can help ensure that the economic rights of children and youth are respected, and support education and financial literacy. Such actions can also improve their business by strengthening, and establishing long-term relationships with their customers. Businesses can also work with peers, government and civil society to promote and advocate for children’s rights.

The session concluded with a discussion of how companies can prioritize children’s rights in the face of a number of sustainability challenges and difficult economic circumstances. Greg Priest of IKEA responded: “We are all facing a myriad of things, but need to understand that all of them are inter-related. Water, energy, climate change, children’s rights…I think they [the Children’s Principles] do a fantastic job of helping us to look at all the challenges we are going to face; and incorporating children and children’s rights into the solutions of those.”

In addition to the Children’s Principles session, the Forum overall delivered a comprehensive child rights lens to corporate sustainability, as children were recognized as key stakeholders of business in all key pillars of the outcome document:
Energy and Climate: Encourage participation of marginalized groups such as children in designing and promoting climate change and energy initiatives;

Water and Ecosystems: Recognizing that water is also a gender issue, empower girls and mobilize their participation to increase the impact of water initiatives, and improve access to water and sanitation to children.

Agriculture and Food: Given the impact of malnutrition on a child’s development, special attention is needed for the nutrition of children. As women and children are disproportionately among the world’s hungry¹, a child rights lens is critical in agriculture and nutrition, including the participation of children where appropriate.

Social Development: Consider not only the human rights impacts of business on children, but also create positive social impacts for children. Develop child-friendly products and services, increase social investment and philanthropy for children’s initiatives, and encourage businesses to embrace the Children’s Rights and Business Principles.

The events during Rio+20 brought sharp focus to children’s rights at a major global conference of business and sustainability leaders – and for the first time, in a comprehensive and integrated manner. The challenge will be to continue raising awareness, promoting implementation, and delivering real and tangible results for children by business. The journey is only beginning.

¹http://www.wfp.org/hunger/stats/