

Ann-Kristin Bergquist and Thomas David

Beyond Planetary Limits! The International Chamber of Commerce, the United Nations, and the Invention of Sustainable Development

This article examines the role of business interests in shaping the structures of global environmental governance between the United Nations (UN) Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972 and the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio in 1992. It demonstrates how the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) managed to establish itself as a key partner for the UN while articulating a neoliberal vision that emphasized the market mechanism and business self-regulation as sources of environmental governance. The article provides empirical evidence that the ICC institutionalized business self-regulation in environmental governance and contributed to the very definition of the concept of sustainable development as we know it today.

Keywords: global environmental governance, International Chamber of Commerce, United Nations, neoliberalism, sustainable development

A half-century has passed since the 1972 United Nations (UN) Conference on the Human Environment was held in Stockholm,

We would like to thank those who participated in the following conferences and workshops for their helpful comments and thoughtful discussions: the Research Seminar of the Paul Bairoch Institute of Economic History, December 10, 2020; the International Governance, Business, and the State conference, organized by Harvard Business School, June 9, 2021; the session “Business and the Environment” at the European Business History Association (EBHA) Congress, September 9, 2021; and the webinar “Neoliberalism in the Nordics,” December 14, 2021. Special thanks to Jenny Andersson, Gareth Austin, Yohan Ariffin, Grace Ballor, Geoffrey Jones, Andrew A. King, Mary O’Sullivan, Dominique Pestre, and Paul Warde for providing insightful comments on an earlier version of this manuscript and to Glenda Sluga for having shared with us unpublished results of her research.

Business History Review 97 (Autumn 2023): 481–511. doi:10.1017/S0007680522001076
© 2023 The President and Fellows of Harvard College. ISSN 0007-6805; 2044-768X (Web).
This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

which set in motion discussion, negotiation, and ratification of a whole series of international agreements.¹ The processes that began with the Stockholm Conference and the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 1973 led, via the Brundtland Commission (1987), to the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio. These historical processes laid the foundation for today's global environmental governance system, including global governance of climate change.² It is widely held that corporations and private regulatory initiatives have taken on regulatory functions in the global economy that were once assumed to be the domain of the state and intergovernmental organizations.³ Yet the historical role of business in the creation of global environmental governance has not been studied comprehensively.⁴ No research has yet provided a synthesized and coherent history of how business interests, knowledge, and ideas became integrated into the governance system.

Drawing on extensive historical evidence from the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) and the personal archives of former UN officials, this article aims to show that international business associations, in particular the ICC, were instrumental to the transformation of international environmental governance between the Stockholm and Rio conferences. As has been noted in the environmental governance literature, the period between Stockholm and Rio saw a shift in the balance of power away from state- and government-centered approaches and toward markets and a liberal environmental governance regime.⁵ This liberal regime shift involved a market-based approach to environmental reform that included environmental taxes and emissions trading along with a rapid expansion of business self-regulation programs, such as voluntary codes of conduct and certification schemes, to promote corporate sustainability.⁶ The shift worked in tandem with new theoretical

¹ Adil Najam, Mihaela Papa, and Nadaa Taiyab, *Global Environmental Governance: A Reform Agenda* (Winnipeg, 2006).

² David Ciplet and J. Timmons Roberts, "Climate Change and the Transition to Neoliberal Environmental Governance," *Global Environmental Change* 46 (2017): 146–56.

³ On the role of private regulation, see Tim Bartley, "Power and the Practice of Transnational Private Regulation," *New Political Economy* 27, no. 2 (2022): 188–202; Peter J. Newell, "Business and International Environmental Governance: The State of the Art," in *The Business of Global Environmental Governance*, ed. David L. Levy and Peter J. Newell (Cambridge, MA, 2005), 21–45.

⁴ Glenda Sluga, "Capitalists and Climate," *Humanity Journal* blog, 11 June 2017, accessed 14 Mar. 2023, <http://humanityjournal.org/blog/capitalists-and-climate/>.

⁵ Newell, "Business and International Environmental Governance"; Steven Bernstein, *The Compromise of Liberal Environmentalism* (New York, 2001).

⁶ Steven Bernstein, "Liberal Environmentalism and Global Environmental Governance," *Global Environmental Politics* 2, no. 3 (2002): 1–16.

thinking around “green capitalism” in the late 1980s and the 1990s that rested on the argument that the capitalistic imperative could be aligned with environmental goals.⁷ Much of the existing research that covers the period prior to the Rio Conference, however, focuses on the impact of political leaders, diplomats, scientists, environmentalists, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and international organizations such as the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).⁸ In this established narrative, business actors play no significant role or are only seen to gain some influence at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s.⁹

A broad range of scholars have noted that by the 1980s, the notion of sustainable development had replaced the 1970s perceptions of biophysical limits to growth and government-centered approaches to addressing global environmental challenges.¹⁰ Some have argued that the invention of sustainable development in global governance was related to the rise of neoliberal ideas in the 1980s, coupled with the UN’s newfound trust in transnational corporations to address the profound environmental challenges of the early 1990s.¹¹ These changes represented a major shift from the 1970s, when business and the capitalist system were generally seen as the problem behind the global environmental crisis rather than as a part of the solution. As Geoffrey Jones argues, the creation and diffusion of private regulation in terms of certification and new accounting tools from the 1990s on enabled large multinational corporations to engage

⁷ Richard Smith and World Economics Association, *Green Capitalism: The God That Failed* (London, 2016).

⁸ Stephen Macekura, *Of Limits and Growth* (Cambridge, UK, 2015); Matthias Schmelzer, *The Hegemony of Growth: The OECD and the Making of the Economic Growth Paradigm* (Cambridge, UK, 2016); Iris Borowy, “Before UNEP: Who Was in Charge of the Global Environment? The Struggle for Institutional Responsibility 1968–72,” *Journal of Global History* 14, no. 1 (2019): 87–106; Maria Ivanova, *The Untold Story of the World’s Leading Environmental Institution: UNEP at Fifty* (Cambridge, MA, 2021).

⁹ For example, see Bernstein, *Compromise*; Leslie Sklair, *The Transnational Capitalist Class* (London, 2001); Jennifer Clapp, “Global Environmental Governance for Corporate Responsibility and Accountability,” *Global Environmental Politics* 5, no. 3 (2005): 23–34; Pratap Chatterjee and Matthias Finger, *The Earth Brokers: Power, Politics and World Development* (London, 2014); Dominique Pestre, “La mise en économie de l’environnement comme règle: Entre théologie économique, pragmatisme et hégémonie politique” [The financialization of the environment as a rule: between economic theology, pragmatism and political hegemony], *Ecologie & Politique* 52 (2016): 19–44; Pestre, “Les entreprises globales face à l’environnement, 1988–1992: Engagement volontaires, management vert et labels” [Global business and the environment, 1988–1992: voluntary commitments, green management and labels] *Le Mouvement Social* 271 (2020): 83–104.

¹⁰ Bernstein, “Liberal Environmentalism”; Iris Borowy, *Defining Sustainable Development for Our Common Future: A History of the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission)* (London, 2014), chap. 2.

¹¹ Levy and Newell, *Business of Global Environmental Governance*; Nicholas Hildyard, “Foxes in Charge of the Chickens,” in *Global Ecology: A New Area of Political Conflict*, ed. Wolfgang Sachs (London, 1993), 22–33.

with the environment while enhancing value. Certification and environmental reporting allowed multinationals to demonstrate publicly that they were becoming more sustainable, while greenwashing simultaneously widened the boundaries of the concept of sustainability such that any corporation could be engaged in it.¹² But so far, few business historians have engaged with issues related to global environmental governance.¹³ The case of environmental governance captures many key aspects of the specific role played by organized business interests, including lobbying, in shaping and reshaping global governance structures in the twentieth century.

Sociologists and political scientists have studied how transnational corporations gained power in global environmental governance.¹⁴ Parts of this research have looked at the influence transnational corporations have had on global treaties, like the Montreal Protocol on protecting the ozone layer, and on governments.¹⁵ It has been suggested that corporate influence has been clearest in the global rise of neoliberalism and its institutionalization in trade agreements.¹⁶ An interrelated stream of research has focused more on the evolution of private regulations, including codes of conduct as a source of governance.¹⁷ This “privatization” of authority has typically been seen in the context of an increasing belief in the superiority of market-driven policies and globalization from the 1990s.¹⁸

Yet, as this article will demonstrate, the ICC had already become an important partner of UNEP in the 1970s and 1980s and was able to influence the increasing importance of market mechanisms within global environmental governance. The ICC and UNEP developed a partnership that by the mid-1980s resulted in a convergence of perceptions that bridged previous conflicting views on the relationship between industrial growth and the environment. Together, the ICC and UNEP worked to construct the concept of sustainable development, in which

¹² Geoffrey Jones, *Profits and Sustainability: A History of Green Entrepreneurship* (Oxford, 2017), 233–62, 379.

¹³ Ann-Kristin Bergquist, “Renewing Business History in the Era of the Anthropocene,” *Business History Review* 93, no. 1 (2019): 3–24.

¹⁴ Jennifer Clapp, “The Privatization of Global Environmental Governance: ISO 14000 and the Developing World,” *Global Governance* 4, no. 3 (1998): 295–316; Levy and Newell, *Business of Global Environmental Governance*; David Vogel, *Trading Up: Consumer and Environmental Regulation in a Global Economy* (Cambridge, MA, 2009).

¹⁵ Robert Falkner, “The Business of Ozone Layer Protection: Corporate Power in Regime Evolution,” in Levy and Newell, *Business of Global Environmental Governance*, 105–34.

¹⁶ Tim Bartley, “Transnational Corporations and Global Governance,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 44 (2018): 145–63.

¹⁷ Virginia Haufler, *A Public Role for the Private Sector: Industry Self-Regulation in a Global Economy* (Washington, DC, 2001).

¹⁸ Levy and Newell, *Business of Global Environmental Governance*.

market mechanisms and voluntary business action were seen as constructive and vital forces. Instrumental in the process was the ICC's ability to connect to the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) and progressively develop a coherent set of environmental management rules to which firms committed and that were recognized by international organizations. These rules helped the ICC promote the principles of self-regulation and legitimate its call for less governmental intervention—a position that became dominant after Rio.

It is important to note that the ICC was a global organization with a long tradition of cooperation with international organizations.¹⁹ It was created in 1920 in Paris to bring together the world's business community.²⁰ The number of ICC member states grew substantially in the twentieth century, from fourteen in 1922 to thirty-two in 1935 and more than ninety in 2019. The ICC could thus count on the financial, organizational, and reputational support of most industrial and financial communities that represented business as a whole and not one particular sector, with the exception of small businesses and rural interests. Within the ICC, national and international business representation worked hand in hand. National business associations and chambers of commerce formed national ICC committees, which sent delegates to the Council of the International Chamber of Commerce, which in turn chose an executive committee to assist the ICC president. Every second year, a congress elected a new president and voted on resolutions reflecting the opinion of the business community. In addition, the ICC had numerous technical committees on subjects related to international business, such as arbitration, standardization of commercial terms, transport, banking techniques, and taxation. These committees advocated free-trade policies and the (self-)regulation of international business activities through standards and codes. They were in close contact with intergovernmental agencies—the League of Nations during the interwar period and the UN's agencies after 1945—which acknowledged the ICC for its legitimate expertise on these subjects.²¹

¹⁹ Thomas David and Pierre Eichenberger, "Business and Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century: A Corporatist View," *Diplomatica* 2, no. 1 (2020): 48–56; David and Eichenberger, "A World Parliament of Business? The International Chamber of Commerce and Its Presidents in the Twentieth Century," *Business History* 65, no. 2 (2023): 260–283; Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA, 2018).

²⁰ Clotilde Druelle-Korn, "The Great War: Matrix of the International Chamber of Commerce, a Fortunate Business League of Nations," in *The Impact of the First World War on International Business*, ed. Andrew Smith, Simon Mollan, and Kevin D. Tennent (New York, 2016), 103–20.

²¹ Claire Lemerrier and Jérôme Sgard, "Arbitrage privé international et globalisation(s)" [International private arbitration and globalization(s)] (Research report, Sciences Po, CNRS, 2 June 2015), accessed 14 Mar. 2023, <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01158980>; Sunita Jogorajan, *Double Taxation and the League of Nations* (Cambridge, UK, 2018);

The last two decades of the twentieth century marked a turning point for the ICC. First, several conditions were favorable to its activities and discourses, particularly the economic and ideological climate of the 1980s, which was largely defined by economic globalization, the rise of neoliberalism during the Reagan and Thatcher era, the opening of communist economies to market mechanisms, and the economic difficulties of the UN, including UNEP. Second, at the same time, the ICC became involved in new areas of international governance where it tried to promote self-regulating mechanisms: the environment, as we shall see, but also the fight against corruption.²² The ICC's members participated in this new neoliberal world order, marking a strong contrast with the previous decade's New International Economic Order, characterized by the UN's attempts to regulate multinationals.²³

The question, then, is how international business associations like the ICC were able to engage with policymakers at the international level of governance. It is often assumed that corporate actors *sought to gain* a seat at the negotiating table to impact legislation at the international level.²⁴ But rarely have questions been raised about if and why business was actually *invited* to the table and, if so, on what grounds. This article shows how the UN and UNEP preferred early on to establish contact channels through umbrella organizations of the international industry (i.e., business interest associations, or BIAs) and not through contacts with individual companies.²⁵ Researchers have agreed that

Marco Bertilorenzi, "The International Chamber of Commerce: The Organisation of Free-Trade and Market Regulations from the Interwar Period to the 1960s," in *Free Trade and Social Welfare in Europe. Explorations in the Long 20th Century*, ed. Lucia Coppolaro and Lorenzo Mechi (London, 2020), 90–108; Rewert Hoffer, "Is the Business of Business Alone? The International Chamber of Commerce and the Origins of Global Business Diplomacy, 1920–1931" (Economic History Student Working Papers, no. 004, London School of Economics and Political Science, Dec. 2021); Nicolás M. Perrone, "Bridging the Gap between Foreign Investor Rights and Obligations: Towards Reimagining the International Law on Foreign Investment," *Business and Human Rights Journal* 7, no. 3 (2022): 375–96.

²² Elitza Katzarova, *The Social Construction of Global Corruption: From Utopia to Neoliberalism* (Cham, 2019).

²³ Nils Gilman, "The New International Economic Order: A Reintroduction," *Humanity* 6, no. 1 (2015): 1–16; Laurent Warlouzet, *Governing Europe in a Globalizing World: Neoliberalism and Its Alternatives following the 1973 Oil Crisis* (London, 2017); Sandrine Kott, *Organiser le monde: Une autre histoire de la Guerre froide* [Organizing the world: an alternative history of the Cold War] (Paris, 2021).

²⁴ Dominic Kelly, "The International Chamber of Commerce," *New Political Economy* 10, no. 2 (2005): 259–71; Newell and Levy, *Business of Global Environmental Governance*; Peter Newell and J. Timmons Roberts, eds., *The Globalization and Environment Reader* (Malden, MA, 2017).

²⁵ For an overview of international business interest associations, see Neil Rollings, "The Development of Transnational Business Associations during the Twentieth Century," *Business History* 65, no. 2 (2023): 235–259; Pierre Eichenberger, Neil Rollings, and Janick Marina Schaufelbuehl, "The Brokers of Globalization: Towards a History of Business Associations in the International Arena," *Business History* 65, no. 2 (2023): 217–234.

international industry emerged well organized with a united agenda in Rio, which had great significance on global environmental governance for decades to come. Yet the historical process that laid the foundation for this victory for international business interests in global environmental governance remains to be explored.

This article is divided into two parts, each focusing on one “turning point” in the interactions between business and the UN in order to understand how sustainable development and environmental private rules gained legitimacy in the international realm during the 1970s and the 1980s. First, it investigates the period that began around the Stockholm Conference and lasted until the World Industry Conference on Environmental Management (WICEM) held at Versailles, Paris, in 1984. The second part focuses on the period that followed, up to the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992.

From Stockholm to Versailles

The early 1970s set in motion vibrant actions within the ICC in the area of international environmental policy. In short, this period included the Stockholm Conference, the establishment of cooperation between the ICC and UNEP, and the ICC’s self-regulation initiatives in the area of the environment. The framework surrounding the Stockholm Conference stressed concerns about planetary limits to economic growth and questioned the Western world’s postwar growth path.²⁶ The debate intensified after the conference when the Club of Rome published its 1972 report *Limits to Growth*.²⁷ Environmental protection and growth were seen as difficult, even impossible, to reconcile in the long run, given future population growth.²⁸ Against this background, industry leaders dreaded costly environmental regulation, while multinationals would also face the challenge of nationally divergent environmental policies.²⁹ What the ICC feared most was not environmental regulation as such, but that it would severely complicate international trade and

²⁶ Barbara Ward and René Dubos, *Only One Earth: The Care and Maintenance of a Small Planet* (Harmondsworth, 1972); Maurice F. Strong, “The Stockholm Conference,” *Geographical Journal* 138 (1972): 412–17; Eric Paglia, “The Swedish Initiative and the 1972 Stockholm Conference: The Decisive Role of Science Diplomacy in the Emergence of Global Environmental Governance,” *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 8, no. 1 (2021): 1–10.

²⁷ Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, Jorgen Randers, and William W. Behrens III, *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome’s Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (New York, 1972). On the Club of Rome, see Schmelzer, *Hegemony of Growth*, chap. 7.

²⁸ Paul Ekins, “‘Limits to Growth’ and ‘Sustainable Development’: Grappling with Ecological Realities,” *Ecological Economics* 8, no. 3 (1993): 269–88.

²⁹ Geoffrey Jones, *Renewing Unilever: Transformation and Tradition* (Oxford, 2005), 342–447.

transnational business operations resulting from disharmonized legislations between countries.

In April 1971, the ICC held its biennial congress in Vienna under the title “Technology and Society: A Challenge to Private Enterprise.” Discussions were based on a background report on global environmental problems prepared in advance by Lord Solly Zuckerman, former chief scientific adviser to the British government. The Vienna conference led to the adoption of a “statement of conclusion,” which accepted and recognized the responsibility that global industry had in “matters of environment.” Noticing the rapidly increasing mobilization around the environmental issue at the international level, participants at the Vienna congress urgently recommended the establishment of a special environmental committee within the ICC. The first substantial task of the committee was to prepare a contribution from world industry to the Stockholm Conference in 1972.³⁰

In July 1971, Charles S. Dennison, director of the Overseas Development Council and member of the ICC’s US Council, participated as the only business representative in a three-day retreat in Aspen, Colorado, aimed at discussing the content of the upcoming Stockholm Conference.³¹ In his report, Dennison warned his ICC colleagues of the difficulties they would meet in the following years regarding international environmental regulation: “Lest the impression be given that the environment effort will be a cooperative tea party, it is obvious that the international industrial community will be involved in a rough, immensely costly struggle.” In his view, major US firms were already fully aware of the environmental issue in terms of their domestic operations; however, because of their increasing dependence on their international operations, these firms had to become equally alert to the international implications as well. Dennison proclaimed that it was urgent to act immediately and that the ICC was the best available “instrument.”³²

This call to action was heard by the ICC headquarters. The organization’s special environmental committee met for the first time on February

³⁰ “Special Committee on the Environment: Proposal for an international environment center for industry,” 29 Nov. 1972, box 11, Swedish National Committee of International Chamber of Commerce, National Archives (hereafter, SICCNA).

³¹ Between 1949 and 1981, the US affiliate of the ICC was called the United States Council of the International Chamber of Commerce. During the 1980s, its name changed to the United States Council for International Business. This article uses “US Council” to refer to both. See Janick Marina Schaufelbuehl, “Becoming the advocate for US-based multinationals: The United States Council of the International Chamber of Commerce, 1945–1974” *Business History* 65, no. 2 (2023): 284–301.

³² Charles S. Dennison (acting chairman, Development Committee, US Council of the ICC) to Willis C. Armstrong (president), “1971 International Environment Workshop, Aspen Colorado, July 1971,” memorandum, 29 July 1971, box 21, P. D. Reed Papers, Hagley Museum, Wilmington, DE.

22, 1972, and concentrated on preparing a response to the basic documentation of the agenda for the Stockholm Conference.³³ A confidential consultation with the conference's secretary-general Maurice Strong took place at the ICC headquarters in Paris, in a meeting that the ICC organized together with the International Institute for Environmental Affairs (IIEA).³⁴ Strong promised to provide informal information to the business leaders about the upcoming conference and to answer questions. Aurelio Pecci, vice chair of the Club of Rome, also attended the meeting in Paris.³⁵ The ICC's connection with Strong would prove to be important for both parties in the future. Strong would later become the secretary-general of UNEP, the anchor organization of international environmental governance from 1973; a member of the Brundtland Commission; and eventually the secretary-general of the Rio Conference.

The ICC raised early concerns that decisions and actions resulting from the Stockholm Conference would have future implications for trade and for international economic relations in general. Product and production regulations imposed on specific industries had to be harmonized, according to the ICC's view.³⁶ To be well prepared for Stockholm, the ICC, following the initiative of the Federation of Swedish Industries, organized the World Industry Conference on the Human Environment to be held in Gothenburg a few weeks before the Stockholm Conference. The Gothenburg conference was attended by over one hundred industrialists from seventeen countries, as well as representatives of the UN, OECD, and the European Economic Community. A unanimous statement by the conference participants was submitted to Strong, who brought it to the attention of the national delegates in Stockholm.³⁷

In Stockholm, the ICC was represented by an eleven-man delegation led by the secretary-general, Walter Hill, and the chair of the Special Committee on the Environment, John Langley.³⁸ As it turned out,

³³ "Special Committee on the Environment. Memorandum of decisions taken at a meeting on 22 Feb. 1972," n.d., box 11, SICCNNA.

³⁴ On the IIEA, see David Satterthwaite, *Barbara Ward and the Origins of Sustainable Development* (London, 2006), 12–13.

³⁵ Walter Hill to Axel Iveroth, 26 Jan. 1972, box 11, SICCNNA; Maurice Strong, "Private Briefing for World Business Leaders," event program, 21 Feb. 1972, box 11, SICCNNA. On the role of business at the Stockholm Conference, see Sluga, "Capitalists and Climate"; Sluga, "Climate and Capital: Barbara Ward, Margaret Mead and the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment," in *The Rise of the International*, ed. Richard Devetak (Oxford, forthcoming).

³⁶ "Industry and Environment V. Identification and control of pollutants of broad international significance," 1972, box 11, SICCNNA.

³⁷ "The World Industry Conference on the Human Environment 29–30 May, Gothenburg, Sweden. Conclusions adopted by the Final Plenary Session," box 11, SICCNNA; "Special Committee on the Environment. Proposal for an international environment center for industry," 29 Nov. 1972, 2.

³⁸ John Langly (UK) was the chair of the environmental and technical legislation committee of the Confederation of British Industry and director of Imperial Tobacco Group Ltd.

business representatives were somehow sidelined in Stockholm.³⁹ In an address to a plenary session, Hill argued that the conference had too much of a focus on science. He stressed the role that industry must necessarily play in any successful global effort to improve the environment and expressed his concern about the apparent lack of awareness of this role at the conference. The president of the Federation of Swedish Industries and members of the ICC environment committee expressed similar views to the international press.⁴⁰ While opposing detailed regulation, Hill argued that the market economy provided the best conditions for addressing environmental problems and called for harmonization of environmental requirements.⁴¹ The ICC also requested more national and international cooperation as well as active involvement with the UN in the future. One suggestion was to set up an international “know-how” bank under the auspices of the UN.⁴²

One year later, in 1973, the ICC launched the International Center for Industry and the Environment (ICIE) to function as an intermediary for information between business leaders and UNEP.⁴³ However, the initiative soon faced major difficulties, and the ICIE disappeared at the beginning of the 1980s in total anonymity. One reason was mistrust between the ICC and UNEP. The ICC argued, for example, that the relationship was asymmetrical, criticizing the fact that UNEP was not sharing information.⁴⁴

At the same time, the ICC launched an initiative that would have a long-lasting impact. In his speech in Rio in 1973, Ian MacGregor, chief executive officer (CEO) of US mining company AMAX, proposed that the ICC should define an international code of environmental practice that would include “fair and equitable rules of industry behavior in the field of the environment.” One year later, the ICC congress in Hamburg adopted its “Environmental Guidelines for World Industry.” In a first step, Paul de la Calle, Shell environmental manager, redacted a draft based on the multinational’s environmental instructions to its worldwide subsidiaries. This draft was painstakingly revised by a special working group and by national committees.⁴⁵ F. Taylor Ostrander, economist at

³⁹ Gladwin Hill, “The Pollution Lobby,” *New York Times*, 18 June 1972, sec. F, 5.

⁴⁰ “Special Committee on the Environment. Memorandum for Discussion,” 1972, box 11, SICCNA.

⁴¹ Walter Hill, plenary speech, 8 June 1972, box 11, SICCNA.

⁴² Federation of Swedish Industries, *Vår Miljö*, no. 7, 1972.

⁴³ Ian MacGregor, “Industry and the Environment,” keynote speech, 24th Congress of the ICC, Rio de Janeiro, 21 May 1973, box 6, ser. 5, 6/1973, Winifred Armstrong Papers, Pace University School of Law Library, White Plains, NY (hereafter, Armstrong Papers).

⁴⁴ See Ann-Kristin Bergquist and Thomas David, “Beyond Limits to Growth: The Collaboration between the International Business and the United Nations in Shaping Global Environmental Governance” (IEP Working Paper Series, no. 80, 2022).

⁴⁵ Winifred Armstrong to M. Stanley Dempsey, 15 Jan. 1974, box 6, ser. 5, 3/1974, Armstrong Papers.

AMAX and a member of the special working group, explained that the guidelines contained a great deal of policy and complained about “unknowledgeable or capricious or just plain unconstructive proposals from some of the National Committees.”⁴⁶

The environmental guidelines that were eventually adopted perfectly represented the ICC’s preference for self-regulation by business. Concerning international environmental governance, the ICC emphasized that environmental measures should not “distort international trade relationships” and argued that the command-and-control methods increasingly introduced by national governments should be limited and complemented by self-regulatory measures. The idea of self-regulation to control pollution was not a new one; it had developed, for example, in the US petroleum industry during the first half of the twentieth century, before this self-regulatory ethics was replaced by government-enforced regulations from the 1960s on.⁴⁷ At the beginning of the 1980s, the ICC revised its guidelines for the first time. The justification given for this revision is interesting because it shows the limitations of the first version: “This updating seemed highly desirable as the present guidelines were somewhat too general having been prepared at a time when industry had felt that a very cautious approach to the subject was required.”⁴⁸

The discourse on economic growth and its relationship to the environment did not favor international business. When Strong made his introductory statement in front of UNEP’s Governing Council in 1973, he called for new growth concepts and models for economic and social development.⁴⁹ He relied on scientific background work for the Stockholm Conference that outlined potential biophysical “outer limits” in relation to the generation of heat, the carbon dioxide content of the atmosphere, the ozone content of the stratosphere, and the health of the oceans.⁵⁰ But UNEP’s more natural science-based view of the relation between growth and the environment widened in the 1980s. As the following section will demonstrate, UNEP would invite the ICC to sit in the driver’s seat and examine a somewhat less strenuous road forward beyond perceptions of limits.

⁴⁶ F. Taylor Ostrander to Raymond K. Fenelon, International Chamber of Commerce, 18 Jan. 1974, 1, box 6, ser. 5, 3/1974, Armstrong Papers.

⁴⁷ Hugh S. Gorman, “Efficiency, Environmental Quality, and Oil Field Brines: The Success and Failure of Pollution Control by Self-Regulation.” *Business History Review* 73, no. 4 (1999): 601–40.

⁴⁸ Special Committee on Environment, Meeting, 28 Sept. 1979, 7, ED 708/2, vol. 138, 1978–1980, Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Munich (hereafter, IfZArch).

⁴⁹ “Introductory Statement Geneva,” 12 July 1973, box 33, Maurice F. Strong Papers, Environmental Science and Public Policy Archives, Lamont Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA (hereafter, Strong Papers).

⁵⁰ Report on the consultation on “Outer Limits,” Aspen, CO, 19–24 Aug. 1973, box 34, folder 335, Strong Papers.

Toward a peace treaty in Versailles. In 1982, the tenth anniversary of the Stockholm Conference, UNEP and the ICC organized separate conferences. In April, the ICC and the Federation of Swedish Industries organized the World Industry Conference on the Environment in Stockholm, with representatives from UNEP and the World Bank, among others. Some one hundred industrialists met to report “on industry’s achievements in environmental protection.” The conference welcomed cooperation between UNEP and the ICC, but business still complained that it had “been too much of a one-way traffic” as industry, “often providing the information,” had “little influence on its use.” The conference also reemphasized that environmental legislation and regulation had to be reasonably harmonized worldwide to diminish the risk of harmful distortion of competition and trade. More growth, not less, would result in environmental improvements through technological development.⁵¹ Yet industry appeared confident that it could provide a technological fix to environmental problems while maintaining economic growth. Successful cases were presented from the pulp and paper industry and other sectors. “We must substitute for the false alternative: protection of the environment or economic growth,” as the director of Environment, Consumer Protection, and Nuclear Safety for the Commission of the European Communities put it.⁵² The deputy executive director of UNEP, Peter S. Thacher, proclaimed in his keynote speech that never before had the need been greater for cooperation among the world’s business community, as it was represented by the ICC and other organizations that came together in UNEP.⁵³

One month later in Nairobi, 105 government delegations, intergovernmental organizations, and UN agencies, plus representatives of more than 100 NGOs, met to review changes to the environment during the previous decade. Their objective was to assess the activities of UNEP and to formulate scenarios for the future. The assessment of the environment was “rather grim.”⁵⁴ However, strong disagreement emerged between industrialized countries, particularly the United States, and developing nations. The latter wanted to develop multilateral environmental cooperation by expanding UNEP’s activities, which the United States opposed. In fact, as a US delegate reported, the Reagan administration was “defensive and even hostile towards multilateral cooperation for resolving global

⁵¹ ICC [International Chamber of Commerce] and Federation of Swedish Industries, *World Industry Conference on the Environment* (Stockholm, 1982), 4–6.

⁵² ICC and Federation of Swedish Industries, 41.

⁵³ ICC and Federation of Swedish Industries, 14.

⁵⁴ David Struthers, “The United Nations Environment Programme after a Decade: The Nairobi Session of a Special Character, May 1981,” *Denver Journal of International Law & Policy* 12 (1981): 269–284, 276.

environmental problems.”⁵⁵ Collaboration with industry was mentioned but did not constitute an important item on the agenda.

Only a year after Nairobi, in 1983, the Governing Council of UNEP approved a resolution “urging the world industry to convene an international conference to examine ways in which their technological and scientific expertise could be applied.”⁵⁶ This was the first time the UN had officially called on industry to help solve environmental problems. The result was the first World Industry Conference on Environmental Management, held at Versailles in 1984 and jointly organized by UNEP and the ICC. A wide range of leading multinational corporations—including Exxon, Gulf Oil, US Steel, Ford, Union Carbide, Dow Chemical, Nestlé, Unilever, Shell, Henkel, and others—sponsored and attended the conference. In sum, the conference brought more than five hundred government and business representatives together from developed and developing countries to examine how companies could meet the growing challenges and concerns with respect to the long-term effects of pollution on the planet.

How was it, then, that UNEP reached out to the ICC to organize a joint conference and that the ICC accepted this proposal only one year after the failed conference in Nairobi? Perhaps the ICC’s 1982 meeting in Stockholm was a good experience, in contrast to Nairobi. Thomas M. McCarthy, chair of the ICC environment committee and director of Technical Relations Europe for the US multinational Procter & Gamble, offered a more precise answer. As he put it, the ICC accepted the proposition by Strong’s successor, Mustafa Tolba, because it “noted an important change in the attitude of the Executive Director of UNEP towards the industry.”⁵⁷ Tolba, in an interview, summarized this change: “For the past 10 years, we have been trying to convert the converted—we have been talking to the environmentalists and we have not tried to go beyond that. . . . Now I intend to go straight to industry and business for support.”⁵⁸

Three main factors were responsible for this shift. First, UNEP was facing serious financial difficulties, largely as a result of diminishing contributions by the United States to the UN.⁵⁹ Organizing an international conference with the financial support of industry was a way to expand UNEP’s activities without putting too much strain on its finances. Second, by working with private industry, UNEP hoped to gain the

⁵⁵ Struthers “United Nations Environment Programme,” 281.

⁵⁶ “World Environment Center,” news release, 3 June 1983, box 272, folder VII, Strong Papers.

⁵⁷ ICC, Commission de l’environnement, “Réunion du 10 février 1984,” 10 Feb. 1984, 2, ED 708/2, vol. 141, 1984, IfZArch.

⁵⁸ Ruth Pearson, “Industry, Environment Focus of UN Conference,” *Journal of Commerce*, 3 June 1983, box 272, folder 2562, Strong Papers.

⁵⁹ Ivanova, *Untold Story*.

favor of the US government, its main funder, which had been very critical of UNEP in Nairobi. As Gregory J. Newell, assistant secretary of state, explained, the Reagan administration “sought to encourage a broader role for the private sector in international forums, because we believe that the private sector can greatly contribute to solutions for a wide range of international economic and development problems.”⁶⁰ Third, the creation of the WCED in 1983 and the appointment of Gro Harlem Brundtland as its chair were blows to UNEP.⁶¹ The Brundtland Commission emerged during the second half of the 1980s as the UN’s environmental flagship. Collaborating with industry was a way for UNEP to regain some influence within the UN. For the ICC, the conference in Versailles provided an excellent opportunity to establish its legitimate right to greater involvement in governmental policy discussions at both national and international levels.

Before the winter of 1984, the conference was being planned by UNEP; its organizing committee was based in the United States and composed almost exclusively of US businessmen. However, this strategy quickly proved counterproductive. The Europeans were losing interest in this conference, as its sponsorship indicated: of the twenty-four companies that contributed funds, generally to the tune of \$10,000, only one (Ciba-Geigy) was European.⁶² Four months before the start of the conference, only \$250,000 had been raised. This was far from the \$850,000 needed to host the event. It was therefore necessary to actively encourage European and Japanese involvement. Moreover, it was essential to “de-Americanize the preparatory efforts” if WICEM was to be perceived by developing countries as a “genuine world-industry conference.”⁶³

In early 1984, Tolba decided to transfer most operations from the United States to Paris. This was made possible after discussions between UNEP and the ICC in which the latter took a leading role in planning the conference. “Finally, we have the Europeans on board,” wrote Casey E. Westell, the coordinator on the US side of the conference, to Maurice Strong in February 1984.⁶⁴ But the ICC agreed to co-organize WICEM on its own terms. For instance, some key ICC figures appeared on the conference board, and McCarthy became co-chair of the

⁶⁰ Gregory J. Newell to David M. Roderick, convenor, World Industry Conference on Environmental Management, 28 Oct. 1983, box 272, folder 2563, Strong Papers.

⁶¹ Ivanova, *Untold Story*.

⁶² “World Industry Conference on Environmental Management Sponsored by Industry and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in Cooperation with the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC),” list of contributors, 23 Feb. 1984, box 272, folder 2563, Strong Papers.

⁶³ Minutes of the 10th Steering Committee, 29 Mar. 1984, 3, box 272, folder 2562, Strong Papers.

⁶⁴ Westell to Strong, 24 Feb. 1984, box 272, folder 2563, Strong Papers.

organizing committee with Tolba. The ICC's involvement considerably diminished the costs of the conference and rapidly attracted new European and Japanese sponsors. The balance of power between the two institutions changed. It was no longer UNEP that set the pace; the ICC had taken the lead.

The notion of sustainable development at WICEM. In mid-November 1984, the conference was held in Paris. A special effort had been made to ensure that representatives from different regions of the world were present. The choice of the Château de Versailles as the site of the conference was significant not only because of the historic importance of the Treaty of Versailles but also because “the Palace, with its monumental gardens stretching away into the horizon, could hardly be bettered as an example of an orderly and highly-managed environment.”⁶⁵ The Brundtland Commission had only started its work, but the notion of sustainable development was already in the air in Paris. In the draft report published in advance of the conference, Tolba and McCarthy argued that “too often had debate about the environment issues been adversarial, and that too many people had seen them as ‘either-or.’” They made clear that the discussions at WICEM would focus on “how to achieve economic growth *with* environmental quality.” They noted that the concept of economic growth had been superseded in some circles by a qualified version of it: “sustainable development.” They asked and then answered their own question: “What does that [sustainable development] mean, exactly? Again, let us try a definition—and then throw it open for discussion. ‘Sustainable,’ we suggest, means that development can be maintained indefinitely without damaging the environment—or threatening development itself.”⁶⁶

Tolba and McCarthy also put forward a rhetorical question about whether sustainable development could happen. The answer was simple: “It has.”⁶⁷ During the conference, some speakers, including Gro Harlem Brundtland, emphasized the importance of sustainability. She was not the only member of the WCED who attended the conference. The administrator of the US Environmental Protection Agency, William Ruckelshaus, also a Brundtland Commission member, served as a convener and keynote speaker. In the final conference report, the notion of “sustainable economic development” was adopted. According to Erik Lykke, OECD's director of environment, this conclusion would

⁶⁵ UNEP, Industry and Environment Office, *World Industry Conference on Environmental Management (WICEM): Outcome and Reactions* (Paris, 1984), 1.

⁶⁶ Mostafa K. Tolba and Thomas M. McCarthy, “Draft Discussion Paper for the Conference,” n.d., chap. II, 1, n.d., box 272, folder 2564, Strong Papers.

⁶⁷ Tolba and McCarthy, chap. II, 3.

not have been possible ten years earlier. It was, he stated, “a widely held view that environmental protection could be achieved only at the expense of slower economic growth.”⁶⁸

The conference also emphasized the importance of collaboration between different stakeholders, especially industry and government. Industry was thus considered an important partner of government, international organizations, and NGOs in the arena of international environmental governance. This marked a major shift since Stockholm. UNEP now saw multinationals, so decried a decade earlier by international organizations, as key players “in helping to raise the standard of environmental management in those countries in which they operated.”⁶⁹ Robert O. Anderson, chair of Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO), the world’s ninth-largest oil company, had attended both the Stockholm Conference in 1972 and the Versailles conference; he reported that “for me, a key aspect of Versailles was a strong recognition—far less obvious in Stockholm—that the problems we face in the environment will not be solved by governments alone.”⁷⁰

At the level of the firm, WICEM marked an important step in the definition of environmental norms, their operationalization within the enterprise, and their recognition by business and international organizations. Leaders of industry, governments, and international organizations discussed several management tools during the conference: cost-benefit analysis, self-regulated guidelines, and environmental impact assessment (EIA). In the 1990s, the EIA became one of the pillars of environmental auditing that the ICC promoted as a self-regulated internal management tool.⁷¹

A key issue addressed time and again at WICEM was the efficacy of self-regulation by industry. The ICC, which had published its environmental guidelines in 1973 and revised them in 1981, was a strong proponent of self-regulation. At the WICEM press conference, Hans König, Secretary-General of the ICC, declared that “international environmental standards should be expressed through guidelines and codes rather than through legally binding treaties among nations. The reason? The virtual impossibility of drafting treaties that are equally appropriate to the many nations asked to ratify them.”⁷² Contrary to the 1970s context, the ICC

⁶⁸ UNEP, Industry and Environment Office, *WICEM: Outcome and Reactions*, 3.

⁶⁹ UNEP, Industry and Environment Office, 14.

⁷⁰ Robert O. Anderson, “Does Industry Have a Global Environmental Conscience?,” *EPA Journal* 11 (1985), 8. On Anderson at the Stockholm Conference, see Sluga, “Climate and Capital.”

⁷¹ Ruth Hillary, “Environmental Auditing: Concepts, Methods and Developments,” *International Journal of Auditing* 2, no. 1 (1998), 75; Pestre, “Les entreprises globales,” 83–104.

⁷² Hans König, Secretary-General of the ICC, statement prepared for WICEM press conference, Paris, 7 Sep. 1984, box 272, folder 2563, Strong Papers.

was not alone. For example, the World Wildlife Fund was a strong supporter of voluntary codes of conduct after a successful collaboration with representatives of the shipping industry to combat vessel-borne pollution. However, not everyone was convinced of the necessity of introducing such measures. Some NGOs and governmental representatives questioned whether this code of conduct “could be anything more than [a] public relations exercise,” and some businesspeople feared they could be “the first step on the road to more restrictive legislation and standards.”⁷³ Finally, the conference recommended continued development of different forms of self-regulation.⁷⁴

From Versailles to Rio

The Versailles conference in 1984 marked an important turning point and changed relations between UNEP and the ICC profoundly. At the same time, it represented an important step in the ICC’s efforts to implement sustainable industry concepts in daily business and administrations of firms.

The organization of WICEM strengthened the ICC’s links with UNEP in three particular areas. First, in 1985 the ICC revised its environmental guidelines with the goal of making them “increasingly specific and actionable,” in response to the criticism that the initial guidelines tended “to list general and philosophical principles rather than recommendations for specific action.” In revising its guidelines, the ICC considered remarks made by UNEP and bore “in mind the WICEM Conference Declaration.”⁷⁵ Second, in Versailles, the ICC and UNEP had decided to organize an annual “summit” meeting between chief executive officers and ministerial-level government officials in order “to provide the opportunity for a high-level overview of worldwide developments concerning industry and environmental management.” The first of these ICC-UNEP high-level meetings was held in January 1986 and focused on conference follow-up.⁷⁶ Third, the ICC participated in a more constructive way in UNEP’s conferences devoted to environmental issues. During this period, the UN negotiations that led to the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer,

⁷³ UNEP, Industry and Environment Office, *WICEM: Outcome and Reactions*, 24.

⁷⁴ UNEP, Industry and Environment Office, “Major recommendations of WICEM,” *WICEM: Outcome and Reactions*, 13.

⁷⁵ “Statement by Thomas M. McCarthy, Chairman of the Commission on Environment, ICC to UNEP’s Governing Council at its Thirteenth Session Nairobi, 15 May 1985,” 4; “ICC Environmental Guidelines for World Industry,” 20 June 1985, 1; both in ED 708/2, vol. 142, 1983–85, IfZArch.

⁷⁶ Summary record of the Meeting of the ICC Commission on Environment, 18 Apr. 1986, 2–3, ED 708/2, vol. 143, 1986–87, IfZArch.

signed in 1987, were central, as they were “UNEP’s greatest achievement.”⁷⁷ The ICC followed closely and participated in the elaboration of the Montreal Protocol, although it was also internally divided on the issue.⁷⁸ However, after the agreement was signed, the ICC adopted another strategy, which aimed at supporting the rapid implementation of the protocol and at helping industry, especially in developing countries, to “use appropriate substitutes.”⁷⁹ This strategy was part of the ICC’s program on sustainable development and strengthened the organization’s environmental legitimacy with the UN.⁸⁰

During the three years that followed Versailles, the ICC environment committee’s main priority was providing input to the Brundtland Commission.⁸¹ This was vital, because ICC members had harshly criticized some preliminary versions of the Brundtland Report. The ICC’s US Council noted that a 1986 draft of the report contained “much biased and fallacious data and suggestions for massive over-regulation by governments and international organizations.” The draft repeated the “same old clichés and unbalanced approach to complex environmental factors we have been hearing from those who see environmental issues as means to further their own social, economic and political philosophies.”⁸² It urged the ICC to intervene.

The ICC was able to influence the final report through several channels. It expressed its concern during the public hearings organized by the WCED in several regions of the world. More importantly, Thomas McCarthy, chair of the ICC environment committee, was a member of the Industry Panel, one of the three panels established by the Brundtland Commission to comment on various drafts of the report. The ICC also had privileged access to some members of the commission, including Susanna Agnelli, an Italian politician and businesswoman who belonged to the family that owned the main Italian automobile manufacturer, Fiat. Her brother, Umberto, was a member of the ICC from the 1960s to the

⁷⁷ Ivanova, *Untold Story*, 152. On the role of business in the Montreal Protocol, see also Robert Falkner, “Business Power and Business Conflict: A Neo-pluralist Perspective,” in *Business Power and Conflict in International Environmental Politics*, ed. Robert Falkner (London, 2008), 16–45.

⁷⁸ Summary record of the Meeting of the ICC Commission on Environment, 27 May 1988, 7–8, 480.1.4.11.1.2, 1983–88, Archiv für Zeitgeschichte, Zurich (hereafter, AfZ).

⁷⁹ “ICC’s Own Programme on Sustainable Development,” in *Sustainable Development, the Business Approach*, ICC brochure (1989), 9, ED 708/2, vol. 146, 1989, IfZArch.

⁸⁰ “ICC’s Own Programme.” On Tolba’s positive reaction toward industry’s response to the Montreal Protocol, see *International Environment Reporter*, 10 Feb. 1988, 2, 124.1.1., AfZ.

⁸¹ See ICC Commission on Environment, Meeting on 18 April 1986, 7, ED 708/2, vol. 143, 1986–87, IfZArch.

⁸² ICC Commission on Environment, “Draft Report of WCED Advisory Panel on Industry and Sustainable Development, Meeting on 18 April 1986, Telex from Mr. Don McCollister (Chairman of the US Council’s Environment Committee), to Mr. F. A. Meier (Switzerland) with copy for International Headquarters,” 3, ED 708/2, vol. 143, 1986–87, IfZArch.

1980s. The ICC's US Council had direct contacts with Ruckelshaus, the US member of the WCED.⁸³ Maurice Strong, also a commissioner, was not hostile to endorsing business interests; in fact, he had "become heavily involved in big business" after Stockholm.⁸⁴ Finally, the ICC was in regular contact with WCED Secretary-General Jim MacNeill, the former director of the OECD Environment Directorate. MacNeill had played an important role in advancing the OECD's agenda, which emphasized the importance of market mechanisms in defining environmental policies.⁸⁵

The ICC's efforts to influence the commission's work were worth the effort. "Following the extensive input made by the industry-based members," McCarthy believed that "the ICC and business at large would be able to 'live with' the final report."⁸⁶ Even if the ICC expressed some reservations about the final version of the Brundtland Report, on issues such as energy, it welcomed the publication of *Our Common Future*, stating that it addressed "significant issues which require the attention of industry, especially the concept of sustainable development." It added that the business community should accept the WCED's proposition to cooperate with governments and international organizations "in fostering sustained economic growth consistent with environmental quality."⁸⁷ As Sally E. Eden has stated, *Our Common Future* was indeed favorable to business interests; "the Brundtland Commission opened the door for the business perspective on sustainable development. Previously, within a no- or low-growth framework, business had difficulties influencing the agenda in a positive light."⁸⁸

Self-regulation for sustainable development. The publication of *Our Common Future* was a huge success. However, as Iris Borowy emphasizes, "the broad acceptance of 'sustainable development' created a competition of who could 'pin his or her definition to the term' and thereby gain influence over future development decisions."⁸⁹ The ICC participated in this competition. From 1988, it listed environmental issues as one of its three highest priorities. In a paper describing

⁸³ Borowy, *Defining Sustainable Development*, 70, 68.

⁸⁴ Chatterjee and Finger, *Earth Brokers*, 105.

⁸⁵ Iris Borowy, "(Re-)Thinking Environment and Economy: The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and Sustainable Development," in *International Organizations and Environmental Protection: Conservation and Globalization in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Wolfram Kaiser and Jan-Henrik Meyer (New York, 2017), 222.

⁸⁶ Summary record of the Meeting of the ICC Commission on environment, 18 Apr. 1986, 7, ED 708/2, vol. 143, 1986-1987, IfZArch.

⁸⁷ "ICC's Own Programme on Sustainable Development," in *Sustainable Development, the Business Approach*, ICC brochure (1989), 5, ED 708/2, vol. 146, 1989, IfZArch.

⁸⁸ Sally E. Eden, "Using Sustainable Development: The Business Case," *Global Environmental Change* 4, no. 2 (1994): 161.

⁸⁹ Borowy, *Defining Sustainable Development*, 179.

its strategy, it put forward that the “exact meaning of sustainable development is . . . highly debatable.” However, the organization believed that “business spokesmen must take part in such debates, and that they must be properly briefed so as to make a strong and positive contribution.”⁹⁰ In this competition, the ICC was able to build strong legitimacy in global environmental governance and thus gain significant influence. At the same time, there were tensions within the UN institutions, and UNEP was sidelined in the lead-up to the Rio Conference.⁹¹

According to Pratap Chatterjee and Matthias Finger, during the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, business and industry shaped the very way in which international environmental governance was considered as well as the boundaries of the definition of sustainable development.⁹² They suggest a number of factors that account for the success of business and the ICC, foremost among which was the ICC’s funding of the conference, its “global organizational structure,” and the fact that it was extremely well prepared. It is true that since the mid-1980s, the ICC had been closely associated with the UN’s work in the area of environmental protection and was therefore able to nicely integrate the UN’s call for sustainable development in environmental management practices. Briefly, three important dimensions of the ICC’s strategy contributed to the organization’s strong legitimacy: the operationalization of sustainable development; the initiation and coordination of business input into the major UN conferences that followed the publication of *Our Common Future* and led to the 1992 Earth Summit; and the creation of a dense business network promoting sustainable development.⁹³

As Dominique Pestre has revealed, in the years prior to Rio, the ICC developed a coherent conception of sustainable development that was applied to the internal management of the firm, a process that had begun almost twenty years earlier.⁹⁴ The ICC’s Business Charter for Sustainable Development—which was prepared in 1988, was published in 1991, and then replaced the initial environmental guidelines—summarized the organization’s conception of sustainable development.⁹⁵ The charter, partly drafted by the oil company Shell, was the business community equivalent to the “Earth Charter” called for by the WCED.⁹⁶ The

⁹⁰ ICC Commission on Environment, “Principal Current ICC Projects in the Environmental Area,” Feb. 1989, 1, ED 708/2, vol. 146, 1989, IfZArch.

⁹¹ Ivanova, *Untold Story*, 227.

⁹² Chatterjee and Finger, *Earth Brokers*.

⁹³ See, for example, “ICC’s Own Programme,” 9.

⁹⁴ Pestre, “Les entreprises globales.”

⁹⁵ ICC, *Business Charter for Sustainable Development Principles for Environmental Management* (Paris, 1991).

⁹⁶ ICC, Commission on Energy, “Meeting on the 11 October 1991, Executive Summary,” 2, 480.1.4.9.4, AfZ.

Business Charter consisted of sixteen principles to help companies convert the vision of the Brundtland Commission into operational reality and “to demonstrate to governments and electorates that business is taking its environmental responsibilities seriously.”⁹⁷ It was thus important to establish policies, programs, and practices “for conducting operations in an environmentally sound manner” and to integrate them “into each business as an essential element of management in all its functions.”⁹⁸ When launching the charter, the ICC informed its members that its implementation was “essential for establishment of public credibility in order to reduce government tendency to over-legislate and to strengthen business influence on public policies.”⁹⁹

Concretely, the ICC’s conception of sustainable development favored voluntary and responsible commitments in four key areas: a new management approach to the environment embedded in total quality management; the life cycle of process and products; environmental audits; and environmental marketing and labels.¹⁰⁰ On a more conceptual level, the concept as put forward by the ICC differed somewhat from the one developed by the WCED. Like *Our Common Future*, the ICC’s Business Charter stressed the environmental aspects of sustainable development (for example, the necessity of managing the depletion of nonrenewable resources and minimizing the impacts of waste on ecosystem integrity). However, by stressing environmental aspects, the charter also “de-emphasize[d] social aspects, in particular intra- and intergenerational equity and the Brundtland emphasis on overwhelming priority to be given to meeting the needs of the world’s poor.”¹⁰¹

The ICC was also an integral part of the follow-up to the Brundtland Report. In 1990, the environment ministers of thirty-four countries of the UN Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) region attended the UN conference on sustainable development held in Bergen, Norway. As part of this conference, the ICC was asked to initiate and coordinate input from constituent businesses. Just before the conference, the ICC arranged the Industry Forum on Environment in Bergen that was attended by two hundred CEOs from all over the world who deliberated

⁹⁷ ICC Working Party on Sustainable Development, “Background Note on the ICC Business Charter for Sustainable Development - Principles for Environmental Management,” 11 Dec. 1990, 125.4.2., AfZ.

⁹⁸ ICC, *Business Charter*, 1–2. For a more detailed account, see Bergquist and David, “Beyond Limits.”

⁹⁹ WICEM 2, Second World Industry Conference on Environmental Management, Session 8: Strengthening Industry’s Role, Background Notes, 1–2, 2 Nov. 1991, 3, 124.1.3., AfZ.

¹⁰⁰ Outlined in ICC, *An ICC Guide to Effective Environmental Auditing* (Paris, 1991). See also Chatterjee and Finger, *Earth Brokers*, chap. 8; Pestre, “Les entreprises globales.”

¹⁰¹ Ralf Barkemeyer, Diane Holt, Lutz Preuss, and Stephen Tsang, “What Happened to the ‘Development’ in Sustainable Development? Business Guidelines Two Decades after Brundtland,” *Sustainable Development* 22, no. 1 (2014), 23.

the environmental challenges facing their businesses, as well as their views on sustainable development. The forum concluded with an “industry agenda for action,” which the ICC later developed.¹⁰²

One year later, the ICC organized WICEM 2 in Rotterdam—the most important ICC event in 1991.¹⁰³ More than 750 representatives from industry, governments, and NGOs met to review the progress made in environmental management since the first WICEM in 1984 and to prepare for the 1992 Rio Conference. The message of the Rotterdam conference concerning international environmental governance was one of a strong commitment from industry to the principles of sustainable development, which could best be achieved by working within the framework of the market economy and through open trade. Therefore, the ICC advised governments to strengthen the role of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in encouraging fair trade principles and to prioritize self-regulation over command-and-control approaches.

At the 1992 Rio Conference, the ICC reiterated its position and expressed satisfaction that many of its recommendations had been taken into consideration by the UN. It also supported Agenda 21, the environmental action plan adopted by 182 heads of state in Rio.¹⁰⁴ External observers noted that the Rio Conference was a landmark success for multinationals. The final documents not only treated multinationals with a gentle hand “but extolled them as key actors in the ‘battle to save the planet.’”¹⁰⁵

Green business networks. The ICC’s influence can also be explained by the fact that it was at the center of “green” business networks.¹⁰⁶ Since 1985, two institutions directly related to the ICC—the ICC environment committee and the International Environmental Bureau (IEB)—contributed to the elaboration of the organization’s environmental management discourse. The ICC environment committee pursued its strategy of closely following UN environmental policies. It also created its Working Party on Sustainable Development, headed by Peter Bright, head of environmental issues at Shell (London), which

¹⁰² Jan-Olaf Willums, “The Greening of Enterprise: Business Leaders Speak Out” (paper presented at the Industry Forum on Environment, a meeting for industry leaders in connection with the 1990 UN Conference *Action for a Common Future*, Bergen, Norway, 10–11 May 1990), 1–3.

¹⁰³ Jean-Charles Rouher, Secretary-General of the ICC, letter, 28 Jan. 1991, 124.1.2., AfZ.

¹⁰⁴ See Jonathan Plaut, chair, Environment Committee, US Council for International Business, prepared statement, 2 June 1992, in House Foreign Affairs Committee, *U.S. Policy toward the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development: Joint Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Affairs* (Washington, DC, 1992), 254.

¹⁰⁵ Hildyard, “Foxes in Charge,” 22.

¹⁰⁶ Sklair, *Transnational Capitalist Class*, 204–5.

interacted with the Brundtland Commission and later drafted the ICC Business Charter.

In 1985, one year after Versailles, Louis von Planta, CEO of CIBA-Geigy, put forward the project of an international bureau of environment.¹⁰⁷ This bureau, as he saw it, would be an “international clearing-house for the exchange of information on environmental management questions.”¹⁰⁸ Von Planta’s proposal had been elaborated by a group of five other CEOs: Robert O. Anderson (ARCO), Louis Fernandez (Monsanto), Charles W. Parry (Alcoa), and David Roderick (US Steel). The support of Anderson, the other main promoter of the IEB, was especially important. During the 1960s and 1970s, Anderson had supported numerous environmental initiatives and was a known and respected figure among environmental organizations. His stature gave legitimacy to von Planta’s actions to launch the IEB.¹⁰⁹

The bureau, which was created several months later, had two objectives. First, it was “concerned with the technological, managerial and operational aspects of environmental management rather than general and policy issues”; and second, it prioritized “responding to the needs of industrial enterprises.”¹¹⁰ In comparison with the ICIE, which was launched more than a decade earlier, the IEB had other capabilities that helped to reinforce the legitimacy of the ICC’s environment policy among its members and with international organizations and NGOs in general.¹¹¹

First, the IEB had no problems pertaining to membership. Multinationals, rather than business associations, founded and financed it. Indeed, its creation illustrated a new form of business lobbying, which had emerged in the 1970s and strengthened during the 1980s. Two of the four previously mentioned American CEOs who helped von Planta to launch the IEB, Parry and Roderick, were active members of the US Business Roundtable that had been created in 1972. This was not a coincidence. In the 1980s, under the pressure of public opinion, the US Business Roundtable shifted its environmental policy from one of

¹⁰⁷ On von Planta’s role in Swiss BIAs, see Sabine Pitteloud, *Les multinationales suisses dans l’arène politique (1942–1993)* (Geneva, 2022).

¹⁰⁸ Summary record of the Meeting of the ICC Commission on Environment, 18 Apr. 1986, 3.

¹⁰⁹ On the role of Anderson, IEB’s first chair, see Raymond J. P. Brouzes, director, Environmental Affairs, Alcan, circular letter on “some recent developments with respect to the WICEM conference,” 14 Sep. 1984, 2, box 272, folder 2563, Strong Papers; on his role in the ICC/UNEP high-level meeting on 23 Jan. 1986, see also A. Clerc, “Réunion pour la mise en oeuvre des conclusions de la Conférence mondiale de l’industrie sur la gestion de l’environnement,” 20 Mar. 1986, Bern, 124.1.1., AfZ.

¹¹⁰ ICC Commission on Environment, Meeting, 17 Oct. 1986, 4, ED 708/2, vol. 143, 1986–87, IfZArch.

¹¹¹ On the ICIE, see Bergquist and David, “Beyond Limits.”

“dogmatic opposition in the name of profits” toward a self-regulated and market-oriented one.¹¹² The creation of the IEB showed that the US Business Roundtable’s European counterpart shared their environmental ethos. It is interesting to note that von Planta was in 1983 one of the founders of the European Round Table of Industrialists, modeled on the US association.¹¹³

Business roundtables also constituted a new form of BIA, as self-selected CEOs of major corporations met at the continental level to develop greater political influence than they otherwise had in national- or sectoral-based business associations.¹¹⁴ The creation of the IEB exemplified this new form of lobbying: the six CEOs who launched this initiative worked independently from the ICC. Faced with a *fait accompli*, and despite the reservations of its environment committee, the ICC finally agreed to integrate the IEB within its structure.¹¹⁵ The creation of the IEB thus illustrated the increasing influence of multinationals within the ICC.¹¹⁶

Second, the relationship between the UN—in particular, UNEP and the Brundtland Commission—and the ICC/IEB was much more cooperative than it had been in the 1970s. Over the course of a decade, the IEB became a key institution within the ICC and contributed significantly to the strengthening of a coherent environmental vision and set of practices. Through its staff’s contacts with various international organizations, it reinforced the ICC’s influence on the 1992 Rio Conference.¹¹⁷

Third, by providing services to firms around the world, the IEB enlarged the scope of the ICC’s environmental activities, which were no longer restricted to Western multinationals.¹¹⁸ As a result, the IEB

¹¹² Benjamin C. Waterhouse, *Lobbying America: The Politics of Business from Nixon to NAFTA* (Princeton, 2013), chap. 3, 197.

¹¹³ On the European Business Roundtable of Industrialists, see Bastiaan Van Apeldoorn, “Transnational Class Agency and European Governance: The Case of the European Round Table of Industrialists,” *New Political Economy* 5, no. 2 (2000): 157–81; Audrey Pageaut, “The Current Members of the European Round Table: A Transnational Club of Economic Elites,” *French Politics* 8, no. 3 (2010): 275–93.

¹¹⁴ Eichenberger, Rollings, and Schaufelbuehl, “Brokers of Globalization”; Waterhouse, *Lobbying America*, chap. 3.

¹¹⁵ IEB provided, for example, know-how and good environmental management technology (offered by its members) to applicants from developing countries (Summary record of the Meeting of the ICC Commission on Environment, 18 Apr. 1986, 3–6). On the activities of the IEB, see the *IEB Newsletter* in 480.1.4.11.2.1, AfZ.

¹¹⁶ On the growing influence within the ICC at this time of CEOs of multinationals at the expense of national committees, see also Susanne-Sophia Spiliotis, *Die Zeit Der Wirtschaft: “Business Statesmanship” und die Geschichte der Internationalen Handelskammer* (Göttingen, 2019), 205.

¹¹⁷ See Summary record of the Meeting of the ICC Commission on Environment, 13 May 1987, 4–7, ED 708/2, vol. 147, 1986–88, IfZArch; Eden, “Using Sustainable Development,” 163–64.

¹¹⁸ ICC Commission on Environment, “Principal Current ICC Projects,” 5.

reinforced the global dimension of the ICC. In the second half of the 1980s, national ICC committees from the Global South participated in the development of the organization's sustainable development strategy. The twenty-ninth ICC congress, held in New Delhi in 1987, placed special emphasis on environmental topics. In his opening discourse, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi addressed the issue. A session called "Combining Economic Growth and Environmental Progress" featured presentations by Tolba (UNEP) and Syed Babar Ali (Pakistan). The latter was particularly significant, as he was an important industrialist who collaborated during the 1970s and the 1980s with the ICC in its attempt to prohibit the introduction by the UN of a binding code of conduct on multinationals. Babar Ali was also chair of the World Wildlife Fund.¹¹⁹ In the 1980s and 1990s, discussions on sustainable development, whether within the Brundtland Commission or in other international organizations, were marked by strong tensions between representatives of the industrialized countries of the North and the countries of the South, the former refusing to finance the protection of the global environment, which, according to the latter, could be a threat to their ability to develop.¹²⁰ By contrast, the national committees of the ICC from the West and the South promoted a sustainable development strategy that called for self-regulation and less state intervention.¹²¹

From 1990, the ICC also received the support of the Business Council for Sustainable Development (BCSD), which was closely but indirectly associated with the ICC. In February 1990, UN Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar appointed Maurice Strong as Secretary-General of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. One of Strong's first decisions was to appoint Stephan Schmidheiny, a Swiss industrialist close to the ICC and the IEB who had developed an early interest in environmental management issues, as his special adviser. Strong gave Schmidheiny two assignments: he was to act as the representative of business at the Rio Conference and to encourage and promote a broad expansion of interests in sustainable development in business and industry.¹²² In his new role as special adviser, and with the help of Edgar S. Woolard Jr., chair of

¹¹⁹ On this figure, see Syed Babar Ali, interviewed by Tarun Khanna, 5 May 2016, Creating Emerging Markets Oral History Collection, Baker Library Special Collections and Archives, Harvard Business School, accessed 14 March 2023, <https://www.hbs.edu/creating-emerg-ing-markets/interviews>.

¹²⁰ Macekura, *Of Limits and Growth*; Borowy, *Defining Sustainable Development*.

¹²¹ On the firms that supported the ICC Business Charter in May 1992, see House Foreign Affairs Committee, *U.S. Policy toward the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development: Joint Hearings*, 321–22; "The Success Story of the ICC's Green Code for Business: More Than 1,260 Supporters," *ICC Business World* 4, no. 3 (Apr.–June 1994): 4–5.

¹²² "Draft: Summary Description of Proposed Assignment of Dr. Stephan Schmidheiny," 25 June 1990, box 495, folder 4675, Strong Papers.

DuPont, Schmidheiny created the BCSD with forty-eight business leaders from around the world. The BCSD published a book for the conference titled *Changing Course: A Global Business Perspective on Development and the Environment*, which presented the business conception of environmental governance at the corporate and international levels.¹²³

A division of labor developed between the ICC and the BCSD. In the introduction to the book *From Ideas and Actions*, which the IEB presented in Rio, IEB director Jan-Olaf Willums, explained that the BCSD had “conveyed a vision of direction and a call for action,” while the role of the IEB was “to transform a vision to reality.”¹²⁴ Moreover, some BCSD staff had worked for the ICC or the IEB in the 1980s, including former ICC Secretary-General Hugh Faulkner, whom Schmidheiny hired. However, there emerged some tensions—the origins of which are not clear—and in 1992 the ICC founded a new organization “to lobby on environmental issues for business interests”: the World Industry Council for the Environment (WICE).¹²⁵ The two organizations, which had distinct models—WICE was based on a corporate commitment and BCSD on a CEO commitment—finally merged in 1995 to form the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD). This new organization would soon become a leading promoter of corporate environmentalism worldwide.

In addition to the BCSD, the ICC also worked closely with another organization, the Global Environmental Management Initiative (GEMI).¹²⁶ In 1989, the US Business Roundtable created the initiative to promote essential tools and measurement systems in the United States and the wider world that would increase the efficacy of firms’ sustainability performance. It included nineteen US multinationals and was related to the ICC as it was administered by the United States Council Foundation, the educational arm of the US national committee of the ICC. As one of its first projects, GEMI participated in developing the ICC Business Charter for Sustainable Development. In 1992, it developed the Environmental Self-Assessment Program, designed to assess a company’s progress in meeting the charter’s sixteen environmental management principles. The program was intended to improve

¹²³ Lloyd Timberlake, *Catalyzing Change: A Short History of the WBCSD* (Geneva, 2006), chaps. 1–2. See Stephan Schmidheiny with the Business Council for Sustainable Development, *Changing Course: A Global Business Perspective on Development and the Environment* (Cambridge, MA, 1992).

¹²⁴ Jan-Olaf Willums and Ulrich Golüke, *From Ideas to Action: Business and Sustainable Development; The ICC Report on the Greening of Enterprise 92* (Oslo, 1992), 10.

¹²⁵ Chatterjee and Finger, *Earth Brokers*, 115.

¹²⁶ On GEMI, see Sklair, *Transnational Capitalist Class*, 204; Pestre, “Les entreprises globales,” 91–92; Haufier, *Public Role*, 45–46.

environmental management systems throughout business organizations.¹²⁷ This process of accountability lent a great deal of legitimacy to the ICC Business Charter, as it constituted an external verification of the environmental performance of firms that had adopted the charter.

During the 1980s, a transnational community emerged from interactions across borders and institutions—business associations, on the one hand, and international environmental organizations, on the other—oriented around a common project.¹²⁸ Indeed, these “green” business networks, for all their differences, had one point in common: their faith in sustainable development based on self-regulation and voluntary codes.¹²⁹ This transnational community generated economic and management concepts that reflected a new consensus on the liberal economic order that triumphed in Rio. However, “there remains considerable heterogeneity between members” of these transnational communities.¹³⁰ Indeed, some of the multinationals active in the promotion of sustainable development belonged at the same time to networks that were far from environmentally friendly. As Geoffrey Jones explains, multinationals “are complex organizations which can make both sustainability improvements and greenwash at the same time.”¹³¹ Shell, the Anglo-Dutch oil multinational, is a good example.

Shell was heavily involved in the ICC’s environmental turn during the second half of the 1980s. Peter Bright, the company’s head of environmental issues in London, was a member of the ICC’s environment committee since the mid-1980s. In 1988, as chair of a small ICC Working Party on WCED follow-up, he reported that the working party believed “the concept of sustainable development and the political strength of environmentalist or ‘green’ ideas were steadily growing in importance. It was highly desirable for the business community, through inter alia the ICC, to take a pro-active leadership position in facing up to this trend.”¹³² This position was not completely shared by his firm; in an internal review, some Shell managers estimated that the

¹²⁷ Steven B. Hellem and Amy M. Goldman, *The Global Environmental Management Initiative (GEMI): A Case for Corporate Leadership; Two Decades of Environmental, Health and Safety (EHS) and Sustainability Progress* (Washington, DC, 2009), 1–5.

¹²⁸ On the notion of transnational community, see Marie-Laure Djelic and Sigrid Quack, “Transnational Communities and Governance,” in *Transnational Communities: Shaping Global Economic Governance*, ed. Djelic and Quack (Cambridge, UK, 2010), 3–36.

¹²⁹ Sklair, *Transnational Capitalist Class*, 204–5.

¹³⁰ Djelic and Quack, “Transnational Communities,” 27.

¹³¹ Jones, *Profits and Sustainability*, 376.

¹³² ICC Commission on Environment, Meeting, 24 Oct. 1988, 6, ED 708/2, vol. 145, 1988, IfZArch.

Brundtland Report was “overly optimistic” in its attempt to combine environmental protection and economic growth.¹³³ Bright was thereafter appointed chair of the ICC Working Party on Sustainable Development, which elaborated and disseminated the Business Charter. Shell’s commitment was not restricted to the activities of Bright. The president of Royal Dutch Shell, Lodewijk C. van Wachem, was one of the European CEOs who joined Schmidheiny’s BCSD. The firm also became one of the founding members of WBCSD.¹³⁴

However, until the mid-1990s, Shell’s environmental commitment remained modest. It was only after 1995 that the company seriously attempted to incorporate environmental considerations into its decision-making after two incidents had damaged its reputation: the dispute with Greenpeace over Brent Spar, a floating oil storage facility in the North Sea, and public complaints made by an ethnic minority in Nigeria against the environmental damage caused by Shell.¹³⁵ Moreover, still in the early 1990s, Shell strongly opposed any measures to combat global warming. Along with other oil firms, it promoted “skepticism” and disputed the seriousness of climate change.¹³⁶ First, Shell financed the works of famous scientists to manufacture uncertainty. Three journalists have shown how Shell was the main funder of the activities of Frits Böttcher, a prominent climate denier who was highly regarded in the Netherlands as the cofounder of the Dutch branch of the Club of Rome.¹³⁷ Second, Shell was among the founders of the Global Climate Coalition, a front group designed to combat the evidence of climate change. The firm was, in this capacity, a player in minimizing the influence of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that UNEP had established in 1988. It was only in 1998 that Shell left the Global Climate Coalition.¹³⁸

¹³³ Keetie Sluyterman, “Royal Dutch Shell: Company Strategies for Dealing with Environmental Issues,” *Business History Review* 84, no. 2 (2010): 221.

¹³⁴ Timberlake, *Catalyzing Change*, 11, 24, 76.

¹³⁵ Sluyterman, “Royal Dutch Shell”; J. George Frynas, “Royal Dutch/Shell,” *New Political Economy* 8, no. 2 (2003): 275–85; Ans Kolk and David Levy, “Winds of Change: Corporate Strategy, Climate Change and Oil Multinationals,” *European Management Journal* 19, no. 5 (2001): 501–9.

¹³⁶ On these policies, see Riley E. Dunlap and Aaron M. McCright, “Organized Climate Change Denial,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Climate Change and Society*, ed. John S. Dryzek, Richard B. Norgaard, and David Schlosberg (Oxford, 2011), 144–60. See also Christophe Bonneuil, Pierre-Louis Choquet, and Benjamin Franta, “Early Warnings and Emerging Accountability: Total’s Responses to Global Warming, 1971–2021,” *Global Environmental Change* 71 (2021): 102386.

¹³⁷ Bas Van Beek, Alexander Beunder, Jilles Mast, and Merel De Buck, “For Nine Years, Multinationals like Shell and Bayer Funded a Prominent Climate Denier,” *Follow the Money*, 3 Mar. 2020, accessed 14 Mar. 2023, <https://www.ftm.nl/dutch-multinationals-funded-climate-sceptic>

¹³⁸ Kolk and Levy, “Winds of Change,” 502–3; Marten Boon, “A Climate of Change? The Oil Industry and Decarbonization in Historical Perspective,” *Business History Review* 93, no. 1 (2019): 101–25. On the ICC and climate change, see Ann-Kristin Bergquist and Thomas

Conclusion

The 1970s and 1980s saw a profound transformation in global environmental governance, which gradually adhered to a liberal environmental vision that emphasized economic growth, market forces, free trade, and a withdrawal of the state. International BIAs have played an important role in this process. The ICC, which was sidelined in the debates on the environment in Stockholm in 1972, gradually managed to establish itself as a key partner of the UN by the 1990s.

After the Stockholm Conference, competing views on how to create feasible national and international environmental governance frameworks were at stake. What the ICC feared most was that UNEP would encourage national governments to implement new regulations that severely complicated international trade, transnational business operations, and ultimately economic growth. The point in question was the risk of disharmonized regulations between countries. Yet the ICC struggled in the 1970s to legitimate its voice in the UN arena and to establish itself as an expert organizational body that possessed the experience and knowledge necessary for international environmental policy discussions. The ICC's early arguments about business self-regulation as an alternative governance mechanism to government interventions had little impact, and its initial environmental guidelines, released in 1973, were barely noticed by the business community or by international organizations. What happened between the early 1980s and the 1992 Rio Conference is a different story, one in which the transformation of the guidelines mirrors the ICC's growing importance in global governance during this period. A broad legitimacy of the ICC's self-regulating guidelines was achieved not only because they were endorsed by the UN but also because of the ICC's global organization, its far-reaching networks, and the financial power of its members.

Two important prerequisites for the ICC's success in institutionalizing self-regulation in international business and global environmental governance were the macro ideological shift in the 1980s and the very concept of sustainable development. First, initial discussions in the early 1980s encouraged visions and policy formulations that relied on market mechanisms and private-sector initiatives. The neoliberal ideological shift that appeared with the Reagan and Thatcher administrations encouraged a broader role for the private sector in international forums, which worked in favor of collaborative initiatives between the

David, "Business Inaction: The International Chamber of Commerce and Responses to Climate Change, 1970s to the Early 1990s" (paper presented at the EBHA Congress, Madrid, 23–25 June 2022).

ICC and UNEP. At the same time, the ICC's argument that more growth, not less, would result in environmental improvements through technological fixes started to gain acceptance. This conceptual shift from the "no- or low-growth" framework of the 1970s to "sustainable development" was clearly manifested at the WICEM "peace conference" in Versailles in 1984, when UNEP and the ICC agreed that inherent conflict between growth and environmental protection was a misconception.

The new definition of growth under sustainable development resolved many of the previous deadlocks in the UN arena between rich and poor countries while also enabling business and governments to reach consensus on a way forward. This more optimistic view on the relationship between growth and the environment helps to explain the gradual legitimation of self-regulation as an alternative to governmental interventions, as traditional business motives, market forces, and environmental protection could be aligned within this new growth-friendly discourse.

Second, as this article has shown, the ICC's role in constructing the concept of sustainable development was not negligible. The ICC was by no means an external actor when the Brundtland Commission developed its report; they were to an extent members of the same transnational community. The ICC succeeded by selectively adopting the notion of sustainable development and combining it with environmental standards and rules that could be implemented within companies. This ability to articulate a market-driven vision of global environmental governance with "sustainable" practice that could be applied to the management of firms enabled the ICC to convince a growing number of companies of the soundness of its self-regulation standards. It also convinced international organizations, environmental NGOs, and national governments of the need to transfer some of the state's environmental responsibilities to business. The problem is that this conception of sustainable development allowed for incremental greening, which did not reflect the real need for measures to prevent an ongoing environmental crisis from worsening, including climate change.

. . .

ANN-KRISTIN BERGQUIST, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

Ann-Kristin Bergquist is associate professor in economic history at Umeå University, and from April 1, 2023, professor in economic history at Uppsala University, Sweden. Her research focuses on the history of business sustainability and environmental governance.

Among her recent publications are “Renewing Business History in the Era of the Anthropocene” (Business History Review, 2019) and “Safe before Green! The Greening of Volvo Cars in the 1970s–1990s” (Enterprise & Society, 2021), with Mattias Näsman.

THOMAS DAVID, University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland

Thomas David is professor of international history at the University of Lausanne. His research focuses on the actors shaping global capitalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly economic elites, corporate networks, and business associations. He is currently working on a book manuscript, Business of the World, Unite! The International Chamber of Commerce and Global Capitalism in the Twentieth Century, with Pierre Eichenberger, which traces the role of business in global economic governance since 1919.