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This paper critically assesses the United Nations-business partnership since the establishment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. This study provides a critical overview of relevant theoretical approaches, buttressed by evidence from public-private partnership cases. Applying international relations (IR) theories permits qualitative research on, and future evaluation of, the partnership’s emergence. This study finds that while we see core elements of the rational choice perspective in the formation and implementation of the UN-business partnership, we see its legitimization via constructivist rhetoric—even for cases where the neo-Gramscian view is compelling. While traditional PPPs are often transnational, the mood articulated by the UN may have shifted goals for “private” parties, with firms’ motivations moving from a purely for-profit stance to one that embraces more social responsibility; goals also shifted for “public” parties, from state to interstate objectives, and from micro (infrastructure) to macro (shared development goals) objectives.

Keywords: Corporate Social responsibility (CSR), International Development, Post-2015 Development Agenda, Public-Private Partnership (PPP), United Nations

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I. INTRODUCTION

The corporate social responsibility (CSR) discourse continues to galvanize civil society and the business sector in advanced economies, particularly in those where the Anglo-Saxon model of capitalism governs. While it remains a debated concept, corporate social responsibility has generally referred to corporate responsiveness to social agendas with regards to corporate behavior, and to performance in light of these responsibilities (Matten and Moon 2008). This can include a range of issues encompassing the environment (Dasgupta et al. 2001; Derwall et al. 2005; Henriques and Sadosky 1999), society (Hillman and Keim 2001; Visser 2006, 2008), and governance (Bauer et al. 2004; Cremers and Nair 2005; Shleifer and Vishny 1997) that affect a variety of internal and external parties or stakeholders (Donaldson and Preston 1995; Freeman 1984). As a result, the promotion of more ethical business behavior has created a vibrant new industry, involving non-governmental organizations (NGOs), shareholder groups, and profit-making consultancies, among others.

One important dimension of this new development is the increasing emphasis placed by the United Nations (UN) on engaging the private sector in partnerships to achieve not only more socially responsible behavior but also the UN’s development goals. As noted by Gregoratti (2013), we have seen the rationalization of such partnerships since as early as 1998 with the creation of the United Nations Fund for International Partnerships (UNFIP), the United Nations Development Programme’s Global Sustainable Develop Facility, and ultimately the Global Compact (206). The formation in July 2003 of a high-level Commission under the aegis of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) on the Private Sector and Development was, for the UN Secretary-General, “… yet another illustration of the rapidly growing partnership … in our work to reach the Millennium Development Goals” (UN News Center 2003).

More recently, the corporate sector has been trying to engage more proactively in the process of setting up the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), agreed upon by heads of states and governments at the UN Headquarters in September 2015. Strong business support for a linkage with the post-2015 agenda begs whether it means the birth of a new way of governance in the UN, in which non-state actors (particularly multinational corporations) co-govern along with state actors for the provision of new development goals. While the United Nations’ activities concentrate on work in peace and security, these activities have significant impact on broader social and economic issues (Ruggie 2003, 317). Along this vein, the UN has made innovative efforts to achieve greater coherence through inclusion of networked organizational forms, such as the Global Compact, that go beyond the traditional intergovernmental mode and help to create a more inclusive and fluid global public domain (Ruggie 2003, 317). Ultimately, this reflects