

**CSR Multistakeholder Forum
Review Meeting 10 February 2009
Centre Borschette – Brussels**

**Key issues & proposals – Gresea
Research Group for an Alternative Economic Strategy
www.gresea.be**

Gresea is a (mainly) French-speaking think-tank and research & education centre founded in 1978 by trade-unionists and third world proponents. We specialise in world manufacturing economics, restructuring & social relations. CSR-related policies have been one of our strong lines of research & intervention, among others within the *European Coalition for Corporate Justice*, the Amsterdam-based European *OECD-Watch* network and the Flemish *Working Group on MVO+* (in English: CSR+). By the way, think-tank: not to be confused with lobby-tank or any such political tanking.

Past dealings on CSR-related policies, highlights

In 1998-1999, Gresea notably contributed to the elaboration of the *European resolution* supported by MEP R. Howitt on the behaviour of companies outside Europe, adopted in January 1999. Early 2000, Gresea was commissioned by the Belgian government to support him the drafting process of the *Belgian law on the Social Label*. In May 2004, Gresea organized, in partnership with IRENE and with the support of the Belgian Parliamentarian Pierre Galand, an international conference at the Belgian Parliament on the issue of the *economic responsibility of corporations*. And in 2005, Gresea launched on its web site "Belwatch", an electronic tool unique in Belgium to afford a citizen *monitoring of multinationals'* activities and practices. Besides, Gresea has published many studies and analysis on various issues related globally to the question of the *link between private sector and development* (ex: North-South SMEs' partnerships, PPP, ethical criteria in government procurements, sustainable consumption...). Mention might also be made to our present two-years research and development awareness programme on multinationals' regulation instruments in the developing countries from a Decent work perspective (cfr. Prospects, infra). A detailed list of our past CSR-related activities is available in French on our website (see: http://www.gresea.be/rsee_intro.html).

Recent inputs

In 2007 and 2008, we focused on the newly trendy subject of the CSR spin-off applied to civil society organisations, i.e. *NGO accountability & governance*. In collaboration with the *Foundation for Future Generations* (FGF) and the Paris-based *Charles Léopold Mayer Foundation*, we thus produced a short synthetic & critical introduction on the subject, thereby condensing a long process of interviews & workshops with leading European actors in the field of NGO & CSO politics initiated and conducted by the FGF.

This brochure ("The accountability of citizen associations – A contribution to the international debate on civil society responsibilities", 38 pages) can be down-loaded from our web site, both in French (http://www.gresea.be/Responsabilite_ONG_Intro_oct07.html) and in English (http://www.gresea.be/Responsabilities_NGO_Intro_oct07.html). One major outcome of this process is that we co-organised last year, with the FGF, an international seminar in Brussels on December the 17th, aiming

to canvass, with participants from different European networks, the ways to go forward on this controversial issue. A report is due soon.

Prospects

As one of the leading member of the Belgian NGO and trade union campaign on Decent Work and its focus on the (CSR-related) regulatory framework applied to transnational corporations' foreign activities, Gresea is presently working, among others, on the key area of *CSR fundamentals*.

Drawn from our past experience, one clear lesson here is obviously that, mostly, people have a very *shaky grasp of the concepts* they've been led to use. Stakeholder, for instance. Who's made that one up? And why its popularity? The same goes for most concepts that have been flung into the CSR debate: catchwords that have not, prior to their consensual adoption, been debated as to their significance, in the philosophical, social and political sense. More largely, the same can be said of most slogan-like catchwords used in this field, be it "fair trade" (who's to decide what's fair? how can trade ever be fair? and why trade only?), "international law" (paradoxically envisioned mostly within some kind of ethereal conflict-free stateless governance) or... "social responsibility" (responsibility to whom? chosen by who? and why make it an issue of responsibility in the first place?).

To summarise (key proposal): if the European Union wishes to make headway in the CSR area, it should, in our view, allocate more space to the *public debate and awareness-raising on the fundamental concepts* involved.

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