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How an abstract idea becomes a set of managerial arrangements: The case of sustainable development

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By what chain of actions does an idea as abstract as “sustainable development” come to have effects on corporate management at the operational level? After describing a setup of arrangements involving meta-organizations and the oil industry, questions are raised about the resulting organizational complexity.

Among the most abstract of ideas is sustainable development, namely: actions by the current generation might jeopardize the life of future generations. This idea concerns our planet’s survival in the coming years, but its definition is not very concrete: “*Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*” (WCED 1987). But how to determine the “needs of the present”? And what do we know about those of “future generations”? Sustainable development concerns everyone and nobody. Nevertheless, it has concrete applications in firms. It has, till present, been studied as an abstract idea and political program (DASGUPTA 2007; MEADOWCROFT 2000; REDCLIFT 2005) or as a set of managerial practices, mainly at the company level (ACQUIER 2009; AGGERI *et al.* 2005; AUBOURG *et al.* 2011; GARRIC *et al.* 2007; McELROY and VAN ENGELEN 2012). In contrast, the process whereby an idea as abstract as sustainable development takes concrete shape in a microlocal setup of managerial arrangements has not been fully explored. This holds especially for meta-organizations, these hybrid setups that, both inside and outside firms, both voluntary and coercive, create a sort of continuity between the exterior and interior of a firm. This article seeks to identify and present such a process[(1)]To follow this chain of actions, it will focus on a special sector, energy, specifically the petroleum industry, and on a single company, Major Group.

Empirical data have been collected from approximately twenty interviews conducted: in organizations specialized in sustainable development at the global level and in the petroleum industry, such as Global Business Initiative for Human Rights (GBI), Voluntary Principles for Security and Human Rights (VPSHR), Extractive Industries Transparency (EITI); in trade associations, such as International Oil and Gas Producers (IOGP) and Eurofuel; and inside Major (in particular its sustainable development division). Other sources have also been examined: reports by nongovernmental organizations (henceforth NGOs), studies on Internet sites, reports by Major on sustainable development from 2002 to 2012 and in-house documents.

This article does not, it should be pointed out, seek to make an assessment of corporate practices related to sustainable development in general or in the oil industry in particular (or, specifically, in Major). Instead, it tries to understand how an abstract idea (such as sustainable development) is turned into a setup of managerial arrangements (AGGERI 2014; AGAMBEN 2007; DUMEZ & JEUNEMAÎTRE 2010), to comprehend this concept’s performativity (*i.e.*, the arrangements set up so that an idea acts and changes practices) with reference to Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words*. This article broaches the question of making an assessment but only from the angle of this setup. Through their reports and campaigns, NGOs continuously assess what firms are doing for sustainable development, and these assessments are themselves part of this setup

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of arrangements that orient corporate practices in this field.

The first part of this article brings under consideration the chain of actions — or the institutional and strategic arrangements — for turning the concept of sustainable development into a means of management with effects on company practices at the operational level. The task is to describe (DUMEZ 2013) these "cogs and wheels" (ELSTER 1989:3), which do not necessarily lead to muffling or "marginalizing" (ACQUIER 2009) the idea of sustainable development but, instead, constitute a form of "performation", as explained by Latour, in other words: the realization of a common objective: "*Neither the public nor the common, nor the 'we' exist: they must be made to be. If the word 'performation' has a meaning, that is it*" (LATOUR 2012:352). Since the idea of sustainable development has had practical applications, our task is to ask how a company strategically experiences this performativity. In its second part, this article will shed light on the organizational complexity resulting from the setup of arrangements described in the first part and on the risk of organizational hypocrisy (BRUNSSON 2002; DUMEZ 2012) or of "decoupling" (BROMLEY & POWELL 2012).

All this said, the analysis may start.

From the abstract idea to a setup of managerial arrangements

A global, abstract idea is turned into a local setup of managerial arrangements through successive stages…

How the idea of sustainable development spread to firms

In the early 1970s, thanks in particular to the report by the Club of Rome (MEADOWS *et al*. 1972), the environment became a major topic. The United Nations turned it into a major planetary issue by convening, in 1972, a summit of heads of state in Stockholm. Sustainable development was deemed a political issue. This global, planetary institution was following its procedures: it addressed member states and relied on NGOs, but did not contact firms. It would take thirty years, till the 2002 summit in Johannesburg, before corporations would be invited to the Earth Summits. Meanwhile, it had become clear that the idea of sustainable development (which the WCED, as mentioned, defined in 1987) would remain abstract if it were not implemented (in one way or another) by corporations, which, like nation-states (and perhaps more so), were a source of environmental problems and human rights violations.

The UN set up special arrangements for involving firms: what Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) have called meta-organizations, *i.e.*, organizations with organizations as members. Created in 2000, Global Compact is based on ten principles having to do with human rights, labor, the environment and fight against corruption. A corporation joins the Compact by a mere letter whereby the chairman of the board declares that the company will comply with these ten principles in its strategy, culture and everyday activities. The firm then pledges to regularly report on its progress in implementing these principles. The website clearly states what the Compact is not:

- legally binding;
- a means for supervising and controlling firms;
- a standard, system of management or code of conduct;
- a regulatory organ or public relations agency.

Nonetheless, Global Compact is the primer for a set of managerial arrangements and procedures. In effect, firms pledge to publish what they have done to apply the ten fundamental principles and to report their progress. The Compact sets a model for corporate activities: member firms must accurately describe one or more initiatives they have undertaken and measure progress. Performance indicators are even suggested.

The Global Compact provides for ranking firms not by performance but by the quality of their reporting on the actions undertaken and on the progress supposedly made. By imposing "transparency" on firms, it enables stakeholders, in particular NGOs, to make their own assessments of corporate performances. As stated on the Compact's website: the objective is to change corporate practices through transparency, a dialog and scrutiny by stakeholders.

These meta-organizations are setups (AGGERI 2014; AGAMBEN 2007; DUMEZ & JEUNEMAÎTRE 2010) that serve as the backdrop for the strategies deployed by corporations (ASTLEY & FOMBRUN 1983). These UN meta-organizations rely on local actions: firms work together at the regional scale to apply the principles set globally. However such actions are not industry-wide even though several problems related to sustainable development, the environment and human rights are specific to a given industrial sector. By the way, the UN has set up other meta-organizations based on this model, for example, in 2010, the Women's Empowerment Leadership Group for promoting equality between men and women.

How the idea of sustainable development is handled at the industry level

Initiatives made by the UN converge with corporate activities at the industry-wide level in the various domains (environment, social, etc.) covered by the idea of sustainable development. In the 1960s and 1970s, the oil and natural gas industry — already under pressure to improve its performance in environmental and societal matters — decided to found its own meta-organizations.

In 1963, the CONservation of Clean Air and Water in Europe was set up. Oil companies used CONCAWE to conduct joint research programs on the industry's environmental impact, well before the idea of sustainable development appeared. In 1974, the International Petroleum Industry Environmental Conservation Association was created as "the global oil and gas industry association for environmental and social issues". Among IPIECA's members are trente-six multinational oil companies (including the six supermajors) and seven national companies. To reach out to small businesses in the sector, IPIECA counts, among its members, sixteen oil company associations representing a total of four hundred firms. This meta-organization pursues activities related to all aspects of sustainable development: environment, climate, health, social responsibility, human rights. IPIECA organizes work groups and drafts "guidance documents" on various topics, such as grievance settlement at the operational level or the management and minimization of wastes in refineries.

In the oil and gas industry, I have turned up eighteen corporate meta-organizatons specialized on environmental and social problems.

How firms are involved in the activities of meta-organizations

A firm like Major participates in most of the meta-organizations that play a role in the oil and natural gas industry. The cost of membership, usually proportional to the firm's revenue, is modest. Thanks to its involvement in these meta-organizations, a firm can influence the "voluntary" rules that the industry sets for itself. The quotation marks imply restrictions, since companies end up with commitments reaching beyond the "voluntary" into what Bastianutti and Dumez (2012) have called a "field of accountability". Involvement in meta-organizations provides the firm with a source of vital information (BERKOWITZ & DUMEZ 2015). In fact, specialists from its own managerial divisions represent the corporation in meta-organizations. At Major, the divisions concerned are sustainable development, legal affairs and public relations.

Major thus assigns persons from its staff to the meta-organizations to which it belongs: in general, one representative per meta-organization. Each meta-organization coordinates work groups, which usually meet once a semester. Participating firms provide, in turn, the facilities for holding these workshops. As a person from Major explained, IPIECA *"is complex, highly structured by work groups, task forces, subgroups. We try to come up with good practices for the industry and to exchange"*. The relative continuity between work in a meta-organization and in the firm blurs the borderline that supposedly exists between the firm and its environment.

How the idea of sustainable development is handled by the firm's divisions

The decision by Major's head office to join certain meta-organizations specialized on sustainable development and the participation of its personnel in the work of these organizations do not suffice to affect practical operations. A new chain of interactions involving committees serves to relate the corporation's functional divisions that are directly involved in meta-organizations with its operational divisions. The firm's representatives on meta-organizations participate in various committees, the interface with the firm's operation divisions. During committee meetings, the company's representatives to a meta-organization report on advances in discussions at that level, and then the in-house committee decides on the procedure for implementing "best practices", guidelines or the rules on reporting.

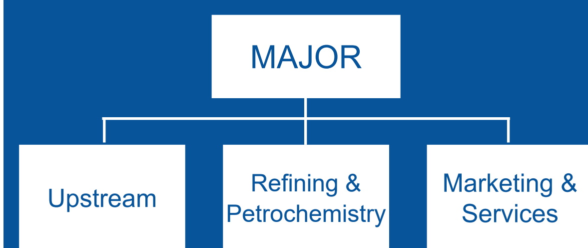
According to one of Major's employees, *"In-house at Major, there's a coordinating committee on human rights, co-organized by the Division on Ethics and by the Legal Division's Human Rights team. This committee meets three or four times a year. It groups all the divisions involved: Safety, Procurement, Financial Communication, Human Resources, etc. We are very big, heavy organizations. Before reaching the executive committee, important projects pass before the Risk Committee, which examines various aspects: financial, legal, operational. Human rights come into account during this risk assessment. The project then enters into existing processes through the redaction of a roadmap: this roadmap defines actions for all divisions."* This is how the Societal Group directive, adopted in 2012, which formulates the head office's position on human rights, was processed. Each subsidiary was then obliged

Major

Major is one of the principal vertically integrated oil companies worldwide. It has operations in every segment of the petroleum industry, ranging from producing gasoline to distributing it in service stations, not to forget petrochemistry and new sources of energy.

Present in more than 130 countries, Major has nearly 100.000 employees, and its sales amounted to approximately $250 billion in 2013.

This group, the result of several merges, reorganized its activities in 2012 into three branches:



Upstream refers to the exploration and production of oil and natural gas.

Refining & Petrochemistry covers refining, petrochemistry, the chemistry of special products and transportation.

Marketing & Services corresponds to the supply and trading of petroleum products and activities related to new sources of energy to transpose this directive — the "smallest common denominator, the *minimum minimorum*", according to an employee. Later on, each subsidiary will be audited to assess how it has adapted this directive.

Contrary to what we might imagine, these in-house committees are not organized like a mirror reflection of meta-organizations: they do not necessarily have clearly demarcated specialties. For instance, human rights are discussed during the meetings of not only the coordinating committee on human rights but also the committee on ethics. The stated objective of these committees, in the words of an employee, is *"not to give orders top-down but to federate energies, values, pass innovations upwards, share good ideas, define performance indicators, galvanize groups of professionals"*.

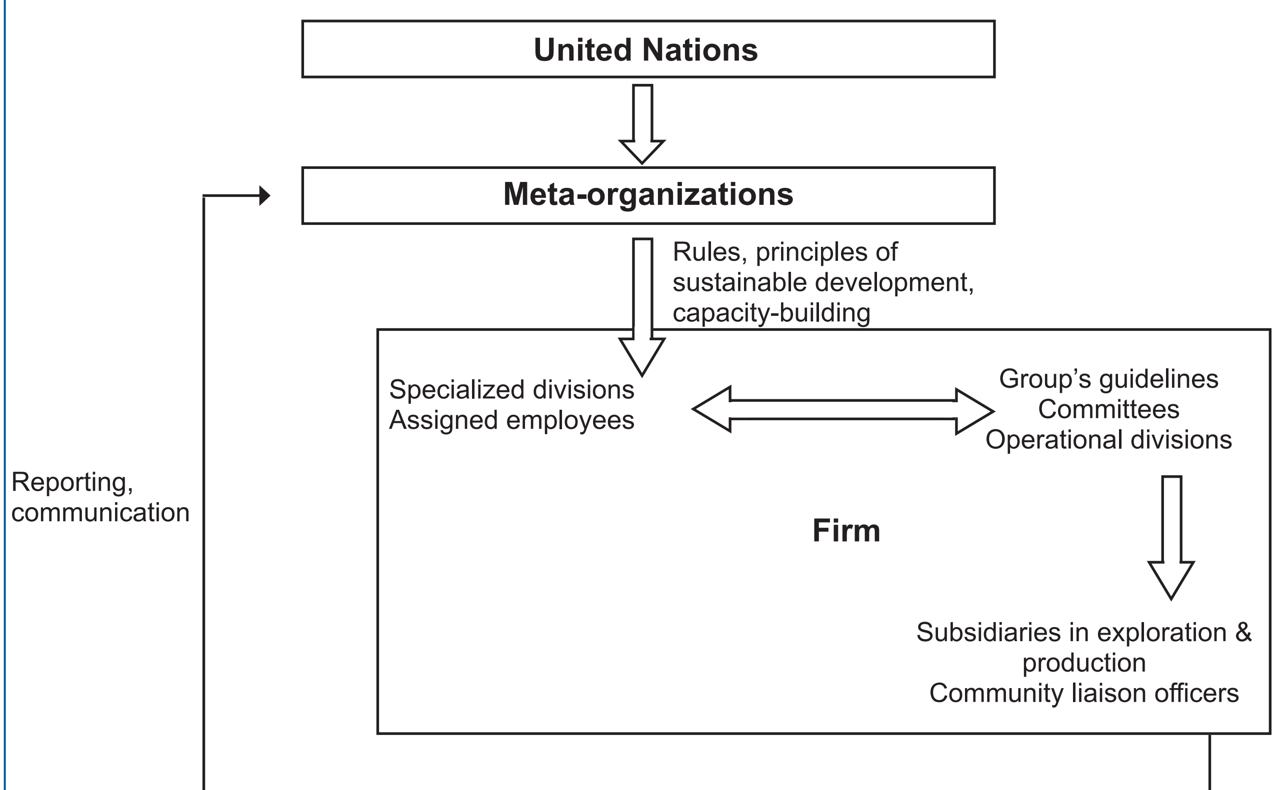
How the idea of sustainable development is handled at the firm's operational level

As the UN Global Compact states, the objective is to place the strategy of sustainable development at the most operational level, where general principles defined at the global level in line with the guidelines of the meta-organizations to which the firm belongs will be fleshed out. At this operational level, global principles are turned into local arrangements and procedures for reporting and making assessments. To manage the environmental and societal impact of its activities at the most concrete level possible, Major has created a new position: the community liaison officer, who performs independent audits and files reports with meta-organizations in compliance with their procedures (as the illustration shows for Global Compact).**(ill.2)**

The local communities concerned by the firm's operations are ever more often indigenous peoples as defined by the UN declaration and Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization. They are relatively new stakeholders in Major's strategy and in the relations woven around sustainable development in the oil industry. Once a country signs Convention 169, companies with operations in an area where indigenous peoples dwell have to consult local communities.

What we observe is that "local" stakeholders tend to take up ever more space in the annual reports filed by firms (AUBOURG *et al*. 2011). Major created community liaison officers to see to it that its operations comply with the principles of sustainable development as formulated about relations with stakeholders. Recruited in the countries where Major has operations and often having acquired experience in NGOs, these officers serve as a relay between the corporation and local communities. Each of Major's subsidiaries

The chain of concretion
of the idea of sustainable development:
From an abstract idea at the UN level
to actual practices at the level of community liaison officers



in exploration and production (E&P) is in charge of appointing community liaison officers. Owing to their knowledge of the language and customs and, too, of the oil industry, these officers facilitate the dialog between the subsidiary and local communities. They not only play a role in the awareness of risks (seismic, for example) but also oversee local recruitment. Furthermore, they serve as intermediaries between eventual claimants and the subsidiary.

In Bolivia, for example, the government approved in February 2007 an act on hydrocarbons that sets up a detailed process for the "consultation and participation" of indigenous peoples in projects related to oil and natural gas. Major's E&P subsidiary in Bolivia thus started, in November 2007, consulting the Guaraní about a project for drilling wells for prospecting. It was led to compensate (in most cases, financially) the communities affected. In addition, various local development programs have been set up, in particular for farming. The oversight and surveillance of the project's environmental impact have been assured through the recruitment of seven community liaison officers (four of them Guarani). Major trains these officers, and the procedures followed are very formal and strict, in a "military" sense, according to one of Major's employees: *"Locally, there are the community liaison officers: it's military… The societal is military and can only be so […] The stakes for me are to see to it that I have the right persons in place, well-trained, that they have the procedures, the right indicators, that there's a follow-up."*

The actions conducted were assessed by auditors specialized in auditing codes of conduct and by NGOs, such as International Alert and CDA Collaborative. In the words of a Major employee: *"For three weeks, on the spot, they make an assessment: has the subsidiary done what's necessary to establish a code of conduct in line with the group's? Then they interview stakeholders and see whether it's the same in terms of perception. Finally, there's a debriefing with the subsidiary's steering committee […] Interest is shown in what works well, in good practices, but focus is also placed on what goes wrong, points of non-compliance. The subsidiary then draws up an action plan, and it has six months to find a remedy for the most important points, depending on its priorities or the local context."*

External audits are a follow-up on the reporting requirements adopted by the meta-organizatons (IPIECA or Global Compact) that the firm has voluntarily joined. Independently of this self-evaluation, firms are subject to critical assessments made by NGOs, such as Les Amis de la Terre (2014). This sparks controversy.

By bringing to light the chain of actions for turning an abstract, global idea such as sustainable development into a set-up of operational arrangements, the first part of this article has described what Callon (2007: 330) has called performativity: *"The success (or failure) of an act of language becomes clear only at the end of the tests to which it is put, through the cooperation it triggers, the oppositions and controversies it generates."* It has highlighted the role played by the meta-organizations created by the UN or by the industry itself. Their status is peculiar, since they are autonomous from the firms of which they are but an extension: corporations are members and also provide the personnel who take part in work groups for drafting decisions. Though based on the voluntary adhesion of firms, these meta-organizations make decisions that limit corporate strategies. In effect, member firms must follow the rules laid down by the meta-organization.

The role of Major's in-house committees in relations with these meta-organizations has been described along with the *ad hoc* set-up designed by the firm at the local level, namely community liaison officers. Mention has also been made of assessments, whether in the form of reporting (a commitment made by the firms that join meta-organizations) or of external audits (ordered by the firm from independent organizations or conducted by NGOs).

Given this performativity, how do firms handle it in their strategies? I would now like to show how this set-up of arrangements leads to an organizational "complexification" that, in turn, potentially worsens what has been called "organizational hypocrisy" (or "organizational decoupling").

Consequences for firms: Complexity and decoupling?

As sustainable development is turned from an abstract idea into a set-up of concrete managerial arrangements, we have the impression of a well-adjusted chain of actions. However the firm's experience at the operational level is quite different. An executive from Major talked about this as a "bazar", "myriad" and even "cacophony".

"Bazar" refers to the number of meta-organizations the firm has joined (as have most of its major competitors too). To each issue corresponds one or even more meta-organizations. For human rights, Major is an active member of IPIECA, GBI (Global Business Initiative) and VPSHR (Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights). For environmental questions, there are IPIECA, CONCAWE, WBCSD (World Business Council for Sustainable Development) and WOC (World Ocean Council). In fact, the firm has difficulty listing all the meta-organizations to which it belongs.

"Myriad" refers to the standards and obligations for filing reports. As pointed out, meta-organizations set standards (such as Standard 2015 of the American Petroleum Institute: Requirements for Safe Entry and Cleaning of Petroleum Storage Tanks) and guidelines for reporting (such as IPIECA's "The Petroleum Industry Guidelines for Reporting GHG Emissions"). These overlapping requirements are more or less stringent for members.

Major has voluntarily accepted several requirements for filing reports on nonfinancial matters. For example, the standards of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) are an international reference mark for nonfinancial sustainability reporting: the firm has to file a report once a year. In addition, Major is a member of the Global Compact with its reporting requirements and of LEAD, which requires an annual report on the progress made on twenty-one criteria of "sustainability leadership". Furthermore, Major files reports following the rules set by the International Integrated Reporting Council (IIRC) for global assessments of performance on financial, social and environmental questions as well as governance. Finally, IPIECA's guide on environmental and social reporting for the oil industry lays down qualitative "due diligences" for relations with local communities and imposes an assessment of the previously mentioned grievance mechanisms.

Communications on the indicators of sustainable development must comply with rules that place Major in the position of sitting for an in-depth examination. This heavy reporting system is hard to steer at the corporate level (ESSID & BERLAND 2013). The multiplication of standards for nonfinancial assessments and communications reflects the lack of uniformity and stability of reporting guidelines and, as well, the proliferation of "institutional entrepreneurs" (ACQUIER & AGGERI 2008) in the fields of environmental issues and social reporting. As a consequence, Major's task is increasingly complex. In other words, "sustainable management" is leading to the creation of new, invisible techniques (BERRY 1983). Sometimes lacking coherence and laden with complications, these techniques then shape how the corporation assesses its subsidiaries and communicates about its performance on environmental and social issues.

"Cacophony" is the impression produced by this myriad of standards and reporting requirements, since the firm has to communicate simultaneously with so many other parties. What makes the situation worse is the assortment of rating agencies specialized in sustainable development and corporate social responsibility. They survey firms every year in order to draw up investment indicators, such as the Dow Jones Sustainability Index. These surveys take the form either of written questionnaires or physical "due diligences"; and lead to a ranking of corporations based on (often questionable) measurements of the latter's performance on environmental and social issues (McELROY and VAN ENGELEN 2012).

One of Major's executives summed up the situation as follows: *"The GRI, it's still voluntary… But if we were to stop, we would have a lot of questions from stakeholders. So it's hard for firms to reduce the scope and say they will no longer communicate about such and such a topic. It takes up time and energy […] For one thing, the obligation to repeatedly communicate takes time; and for another, it spawns additional questions. From the firm's point of view, simplification would be a good thing. Besides, there are competing initiatives […]. We are hoping for a convergence toward something that will satisfy both companies and stakeholders."*

The organizational structures set up by firms reflect the complexity of their environment. At Major, various issues related to sustainable development are, as shown, handled not just by the division on sustainable development but by all divisions and all subsidiaries via crisscrossing committees. These committees are a way to fight against the "marginalization" of sustainable development (ACQUIER 2009), which, otherwise, would be handled by the division on sustainable development alone. Although this crisscross setup has the advantage of facilitating communications on sustainable development and disseminating decision-making among corporate divisions, we wonder how efficient it is. An interviewee at Major said, *"Even in-house, we aren't necessarily familiar with all the committees."*

Several committees are still linked to the division on sustainable development: the coordinating committee on human rights, committee on ethics, committee on climate and energy, the risk committee and the steering committees for the report on corporate social responsibility, for the environment and for capital development, not to mention the societal steering committee. Each topic apparently has its committee, and a new committee might be set up when an existing one fails to work: *"According to the assessment made at the start of the year, this committee did not function in the best way possible. So a new committee is going to be set up with a different composition."* By trying to manage in house the complexity of its environment through its organizational structures, which are, themselves, complex (as the catalog of committees evinces), the firm helps "complexify" its environment. An executive, while explaining that Major has to deal with a "bazar" of meta-organizations, told us about his plan to create a new meta-organization on a new topic but related to the existing topics handled by other meta-organizations.

Ultimately, the interactions between the strategies of parties outside and inside the firm produce an extreme state of complexity with its own momentum. The chain of actions described in the first part of this article tends to harmonize the firm's discourses and operational practices and to turn the idea of sustainable development into an operational performance. In contrast, this growing complexity places the corporation in a situation of "organizational hypocrisy" (BRUNSSON 2002; DUMEZ 2012) or "organizational decoupling" (BROMLEY & POWELL 2012).

The concept of organizational hypocrisy — which is not to be taken in a moral sense — simply refers to the situation where firms in a complex and contradictory environment (CHEVALIER 2013) issue communications that are not fully consistent with each other (because they target different groups) and are "decoupled" from actual practices. When communicating, a corporation must accomplish the feat of, all at once, legally defending its interests, managing its image as an "ideal firm" (VILLETTE 1988) and responding to demands from stakeholders. As a consequence, actual communications, sometimes of very poor quality, do not satisfy demands from NGOs: *"The final text is very poor in relation to what we could have more amply written, whereas NGOs expect more frankness. We have to fight in house against the timidity of certain persons."*

In fact, it is ever harder for the firm to control what is said about it (VILLETTE 2012). An NGO can, at any time, pick out contradictions from among the communications that the corporation is obliged to issue or from the discrepancies between what is said and what is actually done. Firms are thus subject to what Bastianutti and Dumez (2012) have called a "field of accountability" so rife with potential conflicts that they try to defuse them by forming partnerships or participating in meta-organizations. As the study of sustainable development shows, it is ever harder to control this field; and the attempts, both internal and external, deployed by the firm ultimately bolster complexity.

Conclusion

This analysis of Major has tired to show how the abstract, global idea of sustainable development has generated, though a chain of actions, concrete, local arrangements and practices. The idea of sustainable development as promoted by international institutions (like the UN) has been collectively constructed through meta-organizations. Major's participation in these meta-organizations involves, in concrete terms, the participation by employees from its various corporate divisions (sustainable development, ethics, etc.) in the work of these meta-organizations. These employees retransmit information to committees inside the firm. These committees steer and coordinate the application of the principles of sustainable development, such as the Societal Group directive, which then takes a variety of forms in the corporation's subsidiaries. The last link in this chain of actions is local: the community liaison officer, the interface between the subsidiary and local communities.

To oversee the progress made on sustainable development (in particular, on the rights of indigenous peoples), Major files reports and issues communications about its activities in relation to sustainable development. Owing to its voluntary participation in these meta-organizations, which produce standards and reporting requirements that serve for rankings based on socially responsible investment, Major becomes subject to many invisibles techniques (BERRY 1983). Instead of reducing the complexity of information, these techniques augment it and multiply assessment procedures based on increasingly questionable measurements and indicators (McELROY& VAN ENGELEN 2012). The complexity of nonfinancial reporting and communications is buttressed by the organizational complexity both inside (the multiplication of in-house committees) and outside (the multiplication of the meta-organizations that Major has joined) the firm. Faced with the myriad of acronyms and initials that spangle the pages of this article (WBCSD, EITI, CONCAWE, IPIECA, VPSHR), readers have been able to form their own idea about this complexity…

This case study has presented a situation where an organization seems to produce disorganization (DURAND 2013), both internally and externally, that is likely to reinforce organizational hypocrisy or decoupling, as explained. It illustrates the determination to provide a framework but accompanied by many actions that fall outside the frame (CALLON 1998). It would be interesting to examine more closely this disorganization and its effects from a managerial viewpoint. At another level of analysis, it might be worthwhile comparing branches of industry with each other so as to bring to light differences in intra- and inter-organizational structures and highlight the characteristics specific to the petroleum industry.

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