The Evolution of a Global Labor Governance Regime

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During the last decade, the approach by business and governments toward labor and social issues at the global level has fundamentally changed. Industrial relations are rapidly internationalizing by developing new actors and forms of governance to deal with the regulation of labor. This article looks at the evolution of self-regulatory standards in the global labor governance debate. Key is that notwithstanding problems with the lacking legal framework of global regulation and enforceability, patterns of local self-regulation, norm-setting, and international codes lead not only to higher expectations of the behavior of transnationally operating firms, but also to an indirect pattern of regulation. The article argues that particularly the adoption of the core labor standards by the ILO and the setup of the Global Compact by the UN serve as points of convergence. A plethora of voluntarist initiatives that converge over time toward a shared understanding of labor standards is part of the transformation of global labor governance institutions.

Introduction

During the last decade, the approach by business and governments toward global labor and social issues has fundamentally changed. Industrial relations are internationalizing rapidly by developing new actors and forms of governance to deal with the regulation of labor.[1] International labor law has been reshaped by moving away from ILO conventions toward the principle of core labor standards (CLS). Company codes of conduct have proliferated not only through consumer campaigns, but also through the Global Compact of the UN and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD's) guidelines for multinational companies. Firms have accepted responsibility for the personnel policy of their suppliers in industrial relations. Institutional investors have adopted social, environmental, and ethical principles. Global unions have negotiated international framework agreements (IFA) with multinational companies. No firm operating at the global level can afford to ignore issues of corporate social responsibilities.

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This article looks at the evolution of self-regulatory standards in the global labor standards debate. Key is that notwithstanding the lack of a legal framework of global regulation and enforceability, patterns of local self-regulation, norm-setting, and international codes lead not only to higher expectations of transnationally operating firms' behavior, but also to an indirect pattern of regulation. The article argues that particularly the adoption of the CLS by the ILO and the setup of the Global Compact by the UN serve as points of convergence. They define a core of acceptable behavioral norms related to business strategies. A plethora of voluntarist initiatives that converge over time on a shared understanding is thereby part of the transformation of global labor governance institutions.

Compared to national regulation, the nonbinding nature of self-regulation still appears weak. While the national social contract conceived in the 1940s and 1950s led to social expenditure levels of up to 30% of the GDP and highly regulated labor markets in many countries, global labor standards do not entail the notion of comprehensive labor protection. For some, global voluntary standards run the risk of being something of a gimmick that reconciles the wishes of naive activists with the need of international organizations to strengthen their legitimacy in a fast-changing world. The question therefore remains as to the regulatory effectiveness of this new regime.

The article provides two theoretical reasons as to why a private governance regime can contribute to effectively raising global labor standards: first, positive externalities of international coordination for firms, and second, the interest of high-standard firms to impose these on other firms. This motivates firms to monitor each others' behavior, thereby stabilizing the regime.

Moreover, the article argues that the shift from a state-based to a private regulatory regime enables progress on global labor standards by diverting distributional trade-offs, which governments in low-standard countries may face. It does not argue that private governance regimes at the global level are superior to state-based regimes but points out the opportunity to overcome regulatory deadlocks by moving from state-based to private governance regimes. This result is counterintuitive because the opposition by firms is usually seen as hindering labor standards advancements.

The article proceeds as follows: the second section presents the theoretical arguments; the third section gives a narrative account of the transformation of labor standards; the soft law approach by the ILO in 1998, the appearance of mainstreaming institutions of codes of conduct and public private partnerships; the fourth section discusses the relationship of soft and hard regulation; and the fifth section concludes.

Theoretical Framework

The process of global labor governance has been polycentric and not extensively planned in advance of its realization. No single actor has been

TABLE 1
Characteristics of Two Regulatory Regimes of Labour Standards

Traditional Regime of Labor Regulation	Emerging Global Labor Governance Regime
Hard law provides hard sanctions	Soft law provides for incentives and information
Compliance by governments	Compliance by business
Regulated access of private actors: employers' confederation and trade unions	Unrestricted access of private actors: business, NGOs, and trade unions
Authority-oriented	Market-oriented

in control of designing the institution-building process or the process as a whole. Business and civil society initiatives interact in the context of changes in the legal approach toward labor standards, which then feed back to new public–private cooperation.

These different processes take place in various arenas involving many actors but together constitute the emergence of a new set of global labor governance by establishing a global labor standards regime. The new global labor standards regime draws, in principle, on the same type of norms as the traditional legislative model of labor standards developed by the ILO and the European Union (Block et al. 2001), particularly the CLS, but it differs regarding the actors, the appliance of those norms, and "the institutional mechanisms through which social rights and rights of citizenship in the workplace are to be implemented" (Dombois, Hornberger, and Winter 2003, 422).

This new type of "non-state market-driven governance regime" (Cashore 2002) has emerged simultaneously across a number of policy fields, such as global environmental policies, but also the regulation of the internet can be characterized by a number of features (see, e.g., Busch, Jörgens; Tews 2005; Cashore 2002; Knill and Lehmkuhl 2002): market-oriented, based on incentives and information rather than prohibitions, largely voluntary, carried out in a number of partially overlapping networks that consist of public policies and civil society organizations (CSOs) and in cooperation with business. With regard to labor governance, new responsibilities are primarily addressed to firms and not to governments: firms, as the driving forces of globalization, are charged with building bridges between national communities and the global economy (Ruggie 2003, 3). The differences between traditional regimes and new regimes are detailed in Table 1.

As literature on "non-state market-driven governance systems" (Cashore 2002) and international private authority (Cutler 2003; Cutler, Haufler, and Porter 1999; Hall and Biersteker 2002) argue, states are turning to "market-based" and private voluntary strategies as an alternative or supplement to traditional regulation. Firms are already playing a role in rule making, in setting international standards, or pushing for intellectual property rights (Braithwaite and Drahos 2000; Genschel 1997). Responsive regulation can also support and supplement the efforts by underresourced state agencies. Self-regulation is often seen as increasing legitimacy and effectiveness in monitoring compliance (Ayres and Braithwaite 1992). These processes may also lead to a spiral of upward regulation, as firms that are being monitored pressurize regulators to look at others as well (Fung, O'Rourke, and Sabel 2001; Vogel 1995).

On the other hand, there may be reasons to doubt that regulation necessarily constrains firms. Voluntary, market-driven, and private regulation can be dismissed as public relations exercises that aim at deflecting attention from discussions on enforcement mechanisms and legislation. Pressure to compete on international markets may also drive firms to sacrifice labor rights in order to cut costs. Indeed, Mosley and Uno (2007) show that whereas increased financial flows are related to increases in labor standards, heightened trade competition has the opposite effect. In this way, creating international standards means overcoming the pressure that competitive forces place on reducing labor standards.

Assessment of the evolution of the new global labor regime should begin by looking at firms' fundamental interests in a global labor standards regime. Much of the literature on why firms join international organizations contends that international organizations are formed when the costs of direct contracting are higher than those of creating and maintaining an international organization. Abbott and Snidal (1998) contend that centralization and independence stand as two main factors in transaction cost economizing. Where firms stand to benefit from coordination, centralizing the functions that work to enforce cooperation improves efficiency by realizing economies of scale and increasing the authority of the enforcement agency. The independence of international organizations also works to reduce transaction costs by safeguarding the organization's neutrality. Similarly, *public* agencies may also improve the independence and authority of private interests, as Cutler, Haufler, and Porter (1999) point out, because public institutions remain accountable whereas private firms do not.

In their study of private international authority, Cutler, Haufler, and Porter (1999) emphasize that firms may seek to coordinate their behavior in the international sphere to strengthen their position. They suggest that incentives to reduce transaction costs and to institutionalize their influence in the international arena may have increased over time because firms today are under heightened pressure to compete in international markets. These accounts, therefore, highlight efficiency concerns, power politics, and structural factors at the root of firms' incentives to join international organizations.

Gaining data on compliance is also difficult because labor standards are largely open to interpretation and trade unions and collective bargaining rights are particularly difficult to establish in a national context of authoritarian political regimes. Collective action in support for the maintenance of standards is difficult to achieve where independent trade unions are replaced by CSOs (Ebenshade 2001; O'Rourke 2000).

In international relations literature, some authors argue that in order to enforce compliance with labor standards, international organizations must have the authority to prevent abuse as well as punish defectors. In designing the punishment, moreover, international organizations must be sensitive to the individual needs of participants and ensure that temporary defection does not preclude participation in the long run (Milner and Rosendorff 2001). Therefore, one would assume that monitoring compliance with labor standards demands that international organizations have quite extensive resources and a high level of authority.

However, international organizations themselves are not the only ones who have an interest in firms' compliance with standards. Firms that are vulnerable to consumer campaigns via reputational risks or political pressure are generally more proactive on social standards in order to fend off public criticism. These firms suffer when competitors succeed in not complying with the same standards as they do and have an interest in monitoring procedures for the sector as a whole. In accordance with the literature on compliance of states to private governance regimes (Dai 2002; 2007), the victims of noncompliance are likely to act in favor of monitoring and regulation. High-standard firms can thereby be expected to form alliances with NGOs and governments of high-standard states for imposing higher standards onto others and monitoring their compliance.

Therefore, with regard to labor standards, a firm's preference to force other firms to improve their labor standards generally depends on the strength of their own labor standards vis-à-vis other firms. Brown, Deardorff, and Stern (1996) look at a case where competing import firms are forced to improve their labor standards. If these new regulations were imposed bilaterally (say, under pressure from a large firm doing business in that country), the competing import firm would face higher costs without being able to externalize these costs on consumers. If, however, these new standards were to be imposed unilaterally on all countries, the global supply of the product would be reduced, thereby increasing the price and retaining the competitiveness of the competing import firms.

In this case, however, competing import firms do not choose whether or not to implement labor standards per se, but rather how many firms need to abide by higher labor standards. Firms may indeed retain a preference for lower labor standards, and therefore, are only motivated to bring other firms up to their level, but not further. As such, if firms can avoid such pressure in the first place, lowering existing standards may actually be preferred in order to gain competitiveness in international trade or accomplish domestic goals (Bagwell and Staiger 2000). Firms' incentives to support higher labor standards therefore remain dependent on the relative position of firms with respect to those standards.

In sum, a private governance regime on labor standards can be expected to evolve if activities by international organizations and civil society coincide with a sufficient number of firms who are willing to participate in and support such a regime. This can be the case if (1) these firms benefit from centralization and coordination at the international level and (2) victims of noncompliance of competitors can use such a regime for punishing noncomplying firms. Not all firms are expected to participate; rather firms' preferences are likely to vary.

The Transformation of Global Labor Standards

The labor standards debate has long been depicted as a distributional conflict between the north and south, in which northern economic interests—particularly U.S. trade unions—seek to protect their domestic interest, while the adherence of firms to labor standards abroad only increases labor costs minimally.[2] Firms from developing countries are particularly disadvantaged by social clauses in trade regimes (Evans 2000). These distributional effects that strengthen northern interests at the expense of the south have led to a standoff in the labor standards debate during the past few decades. However, this conflict has been rephrased through various developments over the last decade or so. The developments are the adoption of the CLS, the new themes in the trade debate, company codes, and rise of partnerships in global public policy.

The CLS of the ILO

The international labor governance regime that existed during the golden years of "embedded liberalism" was formed primarily from ILO conventions. As a specialized agency of the UN, the ILO is an intergovernmental body that establishes labor standards in the form of conventions and recommendations. ILO conventions have the status of treaties and are binding to the member countries that voluntarily ratify them (Block et al. 2001, 168). Over the years, the ILO has established 156 conventions (plus 25 outdated ones) that have been unevenly ratified by its member states. The United States remains a reluctant member state, with only 12 ratified conventions and several withdrawals from the ILO. Until the 1990s, the process was characterized by intergovernmental high diplomacy, with poorer countries (and the United States) resisting the pressure to ratify conventions that might intervene in their national labor relations regime or raise labor costs.

At its 86th session in June 1998, the ILO radically changed its approach by adopting a "Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work."[3] The document named four fundamental rights that consequently formed the basis for the "CLS": (1) freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining; (2) the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labor; (3) the effective abolition of child labor; and (4) the elimination of discrimination regarding employment and occupation. These fundamental rights were to be respected, promoted, and realized by all members of the ILO, even if they had not ratified the conventions in question. By doing so, the ILO theoretically expanded the spread of important labor standards to all its member states, with the quality of these rights remaining on a lower standard than ILO conventions. The CLS were explicitly liberated from the conventions that underlie them and an entirely new mechanism was set up for their implementation (Alston 2004, 467).

International labor lawyers, such as Philip Alston, call the 1998 Declaration the "harbinger of a revolutionary transformation, the extent to which continues to be downplayed by its proponents, while many traditional supporters of labour rights appear to be oblivious to the consequences of the changes that have been wrought" (Alston 2004, 458). Alston focuses his criticism on the fact that with the emphasis on core rights, a normative hierarchy between different labor rights has been established; that the notion of rights was replaced by principles, that soft promotional techniques replaced traditional enforcement mechanisms, and that the monitoring of these standards was decentralized.

From the perspective of the ILO, the adoption of CLS not only served the purpose of a flexible instrument in the face of globalization, but also helped to deflect criticism that emerged from various sides, particularly after the fall of communism. Employers and governments were increasingly unhappy with the emphasis of the ILO on standard setting and the heavy-handed approach of enforcement; too many standards and too little effect,[4] in particular at a time when the eastern European transformation countries were encouraged to take a tough stance toward labor market deregulation. Also, campaigns by the ILO against child labor were seen as ineffective compared to measures by other UN agencies. The ILO, who criticized all countries alike for failing to accept collective bargaining rights, was under immense pressure to define a new agenda. However, the move toward more legitimacy of the ILO in an increasingly hostile environment was only one factor that led to the change of position. The other was that the adoption of a soft-law approach by the ILO and the definition of a set of CLS also fitted into a wider debate of linking trade with labor standards.

Labor Standards and Trade

Until a decade ago, the labor standards debate was exclusively set in the context of trade negotiations. In the U.S. context, linking labor standards with trade has always been on the agenda, although to different degrees

(Arthur 2001, 286). In particular, U.S. trade unions have used trade sanctions as a means to protect jobs at home and lobbied Congress to uphold these mechanisms in a new trade regime.

Labor standard clauses had been included in unilateral or bilateral trade regulations, either in terms of product bans on imports made by forced or child labor, or under the Generalized Systems of Preferences that gave tariff concessions to certain products and countries. In the United States, the Trade and Tariff Act of 1984 made eligibility conditional on respect for "internationally recognized workers' rights" (Tsogas 2000, 352). These mechanisms were largely unilateral measures in which the country that gave preferential treatment to the product of a poorer country expected some good will with regard to labor practices.

In the early 1990s,[4] the debate on trade and social clauses gained in momentum with the negotiations of the WTO. Labor standards were a major topic in the Uruguay round, with the U.S. administration claiming to refuse to approve the ministerial declaration unless it contained a reference to early consideration of the relationship of the trading system and "internationally recognized labor standards."[5] While this move failed and the WTO refrained from integrating labor standards in their trade regime, the urge to develop a set of "internationally recognized labor standards" persisted.

If the United States had succeeded in making adherence to a set of ILO conventions a condition of membership to the ILO, it would have extended the reach of the ILO not only to other countries, but possibly to its own borders, as well (Arthur 2001, 285). As the U.S. administration had not ratified many of the ILO conventions, in particular not those conventions that were to become the basis of the CLS (see in the succeeding discussions), there was a strong interest in the adoption of a set of principles that were part of the same norms of labor rights but different in their legal status. Moreover, these standards needed to be flexible enough that they could be redefined, depending on the situation. "But the proposed declaration and its soft monitoring system provided an ideal route through which the United States could escape from the dilemma of not having ratified the key conventions itself while applying sanctions in its domestic legislation and seeking them at the WTO level for other countries violations of CLS" (Alston 2004, 467).

Therefore, the report in 1994 by the director-general of the ILO, Michel Hansenne, (Hansenne 1994), which proposed for the first time a differentiation of labor rights and the need for soft law, presented a missing link between the efforts of the U.S. administration to include labor clauses in the WTO negotiations and the ILO's desire to move back to center stage with regard to the promotion of labor issues. It added to the previous tool of hard conventions the tool of soft law, which had not existed in the ILO environment until then. The soft-law approach and in particular the concept of CLS quickly submerged with other activities on global labor governance.

Codes of Conducts

The change of approach by the ILO was preceded and accompanied by numerous activities by CSOs, and by initiatives of the firms themselves. These initiatives developed independently from public policies but were eventually picked up by governments and international organizations and integrated into a broader framework. They focus on the development of codes of conduct that include environmental and social regulation regarding corporate investment. A forerunner in this area was the Sullivan Principles in South Africa (Block et al. 2001). The Sullivan Principles obliged firms to offer desegregated workplaces, fair employment practices, and equal opportunity, as well as to improve the lives of workers outside the workplace (Block et al. 2001, 280). They were used as a way of deflecting criticism of companies that invested in South Africa during the apartheid regime. Other codes of conduct developed during the 1980s in the course of corporate scandals within the defense industry.

The big wave in adopting codes of conduct, however, emerged as a response to consumer campaigns. Fearing that consumers might reject products made under poor conditions, major corporations, such as Levi Strauss, Reebok, Liz Claiborne, and later Nike, decided to address the labor standards problem. Levi Strauss was the first company to develop a comprehensive code of conduct in 1991. The significance of the Levi Strauss example was that it was the first code of conduct on labor practices for suppliers, which were independent business partners that supply a brand name with products or services. More and more firms committed themselves to ensuring consistent application of labor norms to workers, regardless of where they do business and whether they directly own the operation.

Most of these codes of conduct were introduced unilaterally. A survey of the ILO evaluating 215 codes in 1998 found that 80% of the codes were set up unilaterally (Riisgaard N.d., 1); a similar study by the OECD in 1999 counted 182 codes, of which 98 were unilateral, 59 from business associations, 22 from stakeholder partnerships, and 3 based on NGO model codes (OECD 1999). These codes varied widely with regard to content and procedure. Only 122 of the 182 codes covered fair employment practices and labor standards (OECD, 11).

As these accounts demonstrate, it was primarily business itself that reacted by introducing codes of conduct for the following reasons: first, in order to protect the reputation of the brand and the company, which is a valuable asset and is increasingly judged by consumers on the basis of social issues. Second, as a tool of improving supplier relations, because the compliance with codes also enhances quality and delivery times by suppliers and thereby increases trust to the supplier. Third, because higher labor standards may reduce the risk of future liability in the case that workers seek legal compensation or governments launch campaigns against particular industries. Finally, codes of conducts may increase the capacity of firms to react to unexpected crisis and negative publicity. Codes are thereby seen as a strategy to reduce reputational risks in the marketplace (Conroy 2001; O'Rourke 2003).

That companies' awareness of reputation and crisis management increased and was dealt with adhering to codes of conduct was largely attributed to the pressure by public campaigns against big firms. The consumer campaign against Nike in the mid-1990s triggered a wave of similar initiatives. With regard to environmental policies, which also became part of the codes of conduct, the Brent Spar experience by the oil company Shell showed firms the potentially damaging effects of bad crisis management and the importance of reputation in the global economy.

Moreover, the market for socially fair-traded and environmentally sound goods, as well as the effects of consumer boycotts of consumer brand goods, grew dramatically in the latter half of the 1990s. Fair trade organizations set up their own international trading companies. Social and environmental awareness in consumerism and public policy gained momentum at the turn of the century as affluent consumers and investors took the opportunity to act on social and ethical concerns. (Elliott and Freeman 2003; Rodrik 1996, 59–62)

The proliferation of the codes of conduct within big multinational firms was moreover embedded in an increasing drove of firms toward Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), a management tool that spread tremendously during the 1990s. Even though CSR means many different things in different contexts, the emphasis on responsibility and on the vital relationship between business and the community has changed the language of business behavior. CSR has not only become an industry in itself, with large consultancy firms offering CSR advice to their clients. Most multinational firms also have senior executives charged with coordinating CSR functions, who have frequently been recruited from NGOs themselves.[6]

The general proliferation of the codes of conduct was accompanied by a process of mainstreaming and standardizing. This again took place in a number of ways and largely independent of each other. Guidelines and general instruments for employing codes of conduct developed during the mid to late 1990s. An assessment study by the OECD looked at seven initiatives, which can be grouped into three categories (Gordon 2001, 3):

1. Those sponsored by international organizations, such as the OECD guidelines for multinational companies and the Global Compact setup by the UN. The OECD guidelines were set up in 1976 but heavily revised in 2000; the Global Compact was set up in 1999.

2. Those sponsored by business itself, such as the Sullivan Priniciples, the "Global Corporate Responsibility: Benchmarks and the Caux Principles." These principles were issued by groups of senior executives or business leaders with a religious background and an interest in corporate ethics. The Sullivan Principles first developed when advising standards for U.S. companies investing in South Africa

under the apartheid regime. They were issued as general guidelines in 1999. The Caux Principles were a set of recommendations covering many aspects of corporate behavior. They were issued in 1994. The Benchmarks Principles were heavily revised in 1998.

3. Those sponsored by CSOs. This applies particularly to the Global Reporting Initiative and Social Accountability 8000 (SA 8000). Both organizations stem from North American NGOs. The Global Reporting Initiative was set up in 1999 and the SA 8000 initiative in 1998.

In addition, there are two more forms of mainstreaming codes of conduct: the first by global union federations and the second by the International Standard Organization (ISO): from the mid-1990s onward, trade unions negotiated IFA that overlapped with CLS. And, in summer 2004, the ISO set up a working group to prepare a norm on CSR.

All of these initiatives aim to streamline existing practices with varying degrees of monitoring. The business initiatives generally do not seek endorsement by companies but rather provide benchmarks that firms or investors themselves can use in order to judge the social or ethical performance of firms. They also tend to be weaker on human rights, compared to the NGO/public policy initiatives.[7] (See Table 2.) 5

The NGO initiatives, on the other hand, put more emphasis on monitoring and certification. SA 8000 is modeled after the environmental auditing processes that were developed through the ISO. The Global Reporting initiative was founded by CERES, a coalition of NGOs, companies, consultancies, and academics. It aims to give benchmarks for good reporting practices on social and environmental activities of firms.[8]

The public policy initiatives by international organizations are voluntary standards for firms that nevertheless operate quite differently. The Global Compact was launched by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who based his initiative on advice from John Ruggie.[9] The Global Compact is a voluntary initiative that deliberately refrains from monitoring firms. Firms that sign with the Global Compact make a commitment to comply with the 10 principles the CG has established and are asked to provide evidence of such compliance. The CG itself does not verify the information. The Global Compact was designed not to replace civil society activities by state regulations, such as the ILO, but rather to integrate private actors into an arena that was exclusively dominated by state governments.

The OECD guidelines, on the other hand, are recommendations by participating governments issued to the multinational companies based in their countries. They were introduced in 1976 to preempt the worries of developing countries vis-à-vis foreign direct investments. Previously, the code did not really further the development of voluntary codes of conduct. The OECD study in 1999 on codes of conduct found that only one of the 192 codes analyzed referred to the OECD guidelines (OECD 1999, 16).

The emergence of those initiatives, principles, and guidelines had the effect of further establishing a soft web of standards of content and

TABLE 2
Initiatives for Setting Standards of Decent Corporate Behavior

Name	Date	Sponsor	Participating Firms
Caux Prinicples of Business	1994	Business	No participation expected
Global Sullivan Principles	1999	Business	No participation expected
Principles for Global Corporate Responsibility—Benchmark	Revised in 1998	Business	No participation expected
OECD guidelines	Revised in 2000	OECD	No participation expected
Global Compact	1999	UN	2,900[a]
Social Accountability 8000	1998	NGO	1,200[b]
GRI	1999	NGO	197[c]
International framework agreements	Since 1996	Trade Unions	50[d]
Corporate social responsibility norm	2004	International Standard Organization	Not yet adopted

OECD, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
[a]As of June 2007. Available online at: http://www.unglobalcompact.org/ParticipantsAndStakeholders/index.html
[b]As of June 2007. Available online at: http://www.sa-intl.org/SA8000/certifiedfacilities.html
[c]As of June 2007 there were 197 registered Organizational Stakeholders under the business category of GRI that use the GRI reporting standards. Available online at: http://www.globalreporting.org/governance/os/OSlist.asp.
[d]As of June 2007 (Steiert and Hellmann 2007).

procedures of codes of conduct for firms. While only 60% of codes included labor issues in their conduct (see previous discussion), the principles put labor and employment issues firmly on the agenda. The CLS, as established in the Declaration of the ILO in 1998, played an important role in what to expect of firms regarding labor rights. Only the Caux Principles for Business fail to mention the nonuse of child labor, forced labor, and the encouragement of freedom of association and collective bargaining as part of their labor standards (Gordon 2001, Annex Table). All other initiatives incorporate all items of the CLS in their guidelines. The Global Compact explicitly refers to the CLS as the reference point to 4 of the 10 principles. The concept of the soft norm of CLS thereby helped formulate a clear expectation of what labor standards should be. It is important to note that some of the guidelines go beyond the CLS. In particular, the question of fair wages is not only prominently raised by the SA 8000, but also referred to in the Caux Principles. However, the Global Compact, which has so far emerged as the dominant initiative on codes of conduct with almost 2,500 firms participating, does not mention the issue of fair wages.

Not only had the new approach toward CLS fed into the streamlining process of codes of conduct. The major revision of the OECD guidelines of multinational corporate behavior expanded the scope of the firm's corporate responsibility to all global operations of the firm based in the OECD, including its subsidiaries. It also encourages firms to apply the guidelines to their network of suppliers. This can be seen in direct reaction to consumer campaigns, in particular, in the apparel industry. Codes of conduct in these industries have traditionally suffered from the complex web of subsidiaries and suppliers, where responsibility for corporate behavior is diffuse and not transparent (Fichter and Sydow 2002). A major issue in these campaigns is to hold global brand name firms accountable for the actions of their suppliers. The OECD guidelines have thereby recognized this need and included it in its newly revised version.[10]

The most comprehensive forms of establishing labor standards are the IFA that are negotiated by international trade union bodies (Rusgard 2004; $\boxed{6}$ Taylor 2004; Wills 2002). The trade unions themselves do not regard those agreements as codes of conduct because they are negotiated rather than unilaterally set (International Federation of Free Trade Unions [ICFTU] 2004). Moreover, with regard to the provisions on monitoring and trade union consultation, the IFA go far beyond the average code of conduct. They are typically negotiated within European firms in which labor rights are already strongly entrenched.

However, the types of substantial rights these framework agreements provide are similar to those of the codes of conduct. Out of the 34 IFA, 27 make reference to CLS (Bourque 2005). They are modeled on the ICFTU/ ITS Code of Labour Practices.

The most recent form of streamlining CLS takes place in the framework of the ISO. A working group was set up in 2003 to explore the potential to set a quality standard for companies on social responsibility (Tamm Hallström 2006).

The second element of the new global labor governance regime therefore consisted of the emergence of streamlining initiatives for privately set up codes of conduct. This process of streamlining was greatly enhanced by the strategy of the UN to give these initiatives a new platform in the form of the global compact.

Combining the Building Blocks

The emergence of a new global labor governance regime is based on a number of building blocks that emerged from different actors whose actions reinforced one another. The various threads leading to the new regime were:

1. The attempt by governments to overcome the standoff between industrializing and industrialized countries in the world trade regime and within the ILO by replacing social clauses in the WTO with commitment by firms;

2. The increasing pressure on global firms by CSOs to adopt responsibility for their supplier network in countries with weak labor standards, thereby increasing interest of leading global firms within the business community to share the burden of higher labor standards among all global firms.
3. The mainstreaming process utilizing various codes of conduct initiatives that are based on public policy, business itself, CSOs, trade unions, and, recently, standard setting organizations.
4. The urge of the UN and their agencies to redefine their role and assert new momentum in regulating the world economy.
5. The attempts by global unions to use the positive attitude and vulnerable position by business and the UN toward CLS to negotiate global agreements.

The most important shared focal point of all these developments was the acceptance of Core Labour Rights as defined by the ILO Declaration in 1998. It has provided a clear normative orientation within these processes toward a shared understanding of what constitutes decent corporate behavior with regard to global labor relations. The idea of CLS was later taken up and widened to include environmental standards by the Global Compact. In the words of Georg Kell, the head of the Global Compact Office: "While the Global Compact cannot solve all the deficiency of global capitalism, it can make a significant contribution to by laying a foundation to shared values and harnessing the skills and resources of the private sector" (Kell and Levin 2003, 152).

The analysis shows that institution-building processes are driven primarily by the UN, in particular the Global Compact, by business, and by CSOs. Traditional governmental labor standard organizations, such as the ILO and the OECD, have been adjusting to the process rather than driving it. Trade unions have jumped on the bandwagon by negotiating framework agreements modeled on codes of conduct. These processes coined a code for corporate behavior that is partly developed by business, partly institutionalized by international agencies and networks of NGOs and public policy. The result is a normative orientation toward corporate responsibility of all actors, public and private, that frame the policymaking agenda toward a decentralized private regulatory regime.

Backing up Decentralized Private Governance Institutions

Over the last 20 years, the debate of labor standards moved from regulation by ILO convention to codes of conducts, from governments to multinational firms, from centralized approaches to decentralized settings. The emerging pattern of decentralized private governance institutions suffers from proper implementation and monitoring procedures because the voluntary mechanism only works if firms are not deterred from participation by imposing too many obligations and commitment upon them. Moreover, they introduce a two-tier regime of industrial citizenship in which the distinction between the first and the second tier is defined by the boundary of the firm.

Voluntarism is currently seen as a key instrument to engage business in issues of sustainability and decent corporate behavior. In March 2006, the EU commission launched a communication confirming its voluntarist approach toward CSR. Similarly, the Global Compact has long shied away from monitoring the implementation of its principles in firms that voluntary sign up for the compact.

Voluntarist initiatives rely on the firms' self-interests to improve corporate behavior for business reasons (the "business case"). Firms have a number of reasons to improve the quality of working conditions of their own subsidiaries and suppliers, if this improves the quality of management and their products and minimizes risks. However, as with other business decisions, decent corporate behavior becomes one item among many within a larger equation. In a cost-benefit analysis, a firm might come to the conclusion that implementing a code of conduct either makes business sense or not.

Moreover, demands on transparency and reporting obligations by voluntary regulatory agencies will also impose costs. Multi-stakeholder processes, such as the Global Compact and the Global Reporting Initiative, aim to identify what level of obligation can be demanded from firms without deterring participation. This creates a dilemma between high- and low-quality regulation. Regulatory agencies have the choice to either keep the threshold low in order to attract as many multinational enterprises as possible to enter their schemes or to maintain relatively high standards in order to protect their reputation within the multi-stakeholder community.

The primary stakeholders within these regulatory agencies are those firms which have already accepted and implemented labor standard regimes along their own value chain. Usually, these are firms that are particularly vulnerable to public pressure and/or consumer campaigns. As in national collective bargaining systems, firms seek the protection from collective standards in order to fend off industrial action or other forms of protest by either NGOs or trade unions. These firms are, however, unlikely to push for lowering standards for the sake of luring other firms into the scheme because this will not protect them from public criticism. Moreover, these firms have an interest in sharing their costs with their competitors.

Private self-regulation is therefore likely to become more sophisticated in dealing with problems of monitoring, reporting, and implementing in the interest of those firms that are in the media spotlight and campaign groups at the expense of broadening its membership base. As they are at the center of regulatory agencies, private regulation is less likely to level downward.

However, even if voluntarism does not lead to a downward pressure on standards, the effects of private regulation remains patchy as long as not all firms participate in these activities. Currently, the uptake of firms in the Global Compact is around 5% of all multinational firms (Benner and Witte 2006). As a consequence, workers in the same country might enjoy different rights depending on which firms employ them. Firms that are actively engaged in the certification of its value chain will create better working and health and safety conditions than those who shy away from certification. In the absence of legally regulated minimum standards, some firms might be tempted to continue the lack of protection and advantage-taking of cheap labor and no regulation (Vogel 2005). This might particularly be the case if the multinational firm itself is headquartered in a country with weak labor standards, where regime competition will occur between firm-based regimes of high- and low-quality management of the value chain.

Whether firm-based regime competition will lead to upward or downward pressure on the management of the value chain will ultimately depend on the self-organization of those firms which are "trading up" (Vogel 1995). These firms will attempt to deflect criticism of their own behavior by pointing to other firms, in particular competitors who are not yet part of the regulatory mechanisms. Peer pressure among firms in the same sector and product market can lead to an upward pressure of regulation in order to level out competition. The more firms are drawn into the mode of voluntary regulation, the more easily defectors can be targeted by NGOs and pressure groups.

As globally acting firms—vulnerable to consumer campaigns and CSO pressure—experience increasing costs of corporate responsibility, they might start lobbying for global regulation on these issues. For example, the responses of firms to the green book by the EU Commission on CSR shows that their attitudes on CSR regulations vary, with consumer brand names such as Adidas and Levi Strauss having a more favorable approach toward regulation than others.[11]

For this, it is crucial that high-standard private firms organize in industry associations at the global level. Political pressure and lobbying toward a public regulation of labor standards will not be achieved without industrial associations that have a minimum level of coherence and organizational structures and that are primarily based upon big firms that have already achieved a high level of sophistication of quality management. In this regard, private regulatory agencies play an important role. Private self-regulatory regimes have as much as a standard-setting function as they provide a forum for private firms to interact and form political communities and are therefore the potential breeding ground for global industry associations.

Conclusions

One can derive several implications from the emergence of a global labor standard regime. First, national governments are not necessarily veto players in the emergence of the new regime. The lack of governmental commitment in implementing labor standards in some countries does not rule out a convergence of globally set norms on labor standards. The distributional struggle between poor and rich countries and their relative competitive interests can be superseded by a new constellation of actors in which an alliance of high-standard firms, international institutions, and CSOs can set and reinforce minimum standards of economic activities.

Second, the lack of coordination and the existence of collective action problems related to various decentralized activities have not prevented the convergence on a coherent set of norms. It is an open question whether a similar set of norms would have also developed without the ILO's contribution to define CLS and the decision by the Global Compact to use the CLS as part of their principles. It seems clear, however, that the convergence on one set of norms has helped to streamline expectations on all sides.

Third, as with compliance issues in the debate on international institutions, the strongest incentives for monitoring compliance lie with the victims of noncompliance. These can not only be marginalized groups of workers, NGOs, but also business itself. Developing monitoring instruments, with which costs can be shared between these actors—NGOs and business—is likely to strengthen the monitoring effects.

Many aspects of the future development of the global regime of labor standards have not yet been determined. The effectiveness of voluntary enforcement mechanisms based on businesses' behavior depends on the interests of competing firms. Whether the factors that prompt a firm to become a leader in social standards are the same that lead them to participate in voluntary regulatory agencies or monitor the noncompliance of other firms, remains to be seen. Although a virtuous circle of high-standard firms pushing for high labor standards and thereby breeding more high-standard firms may exist, it is by no means a quid pro quo. Other forces may be at work, weakening high-standard firms' interest in pushing for a global labor regime or undermining the enforceability of the regime.

The limits and meaning of private actors' involvement in private regulatory agencies are also unclear. The scale and scope of firms' commitment toward maintaining and monitoring labor standards is likely to depend on sectors, size, the value chain, and leadership. Some firms, sectors, or regions might remain outside the regulatory system. Weak enforcement could provide incentives for some firms and sectors to compete by undercutting labor standards that might prevail elsewhere. Firms from weakly regulated countries might look for niches in the regulatory system to exploit competitive advantages. Rather than raising standards overall, a segmentation of markets and firms could lead to an increasing gap of high and low standards in specific sectors. How the regulatory regime can be expanded to those areas remains unclear.

Whether soft law will lead to more formal regulation or will remain the basis of the global labor governance regime is to be determined. Even where firms monitor each other, protest against unacceptable labor conditions might not lead to enforcement if the firms concerned are not vulnerable to public pressure. Stronger instruments for punishing noncomplying firms, however, rely on hard laws that can effectively intervene. Cross-class coalitions of firms and labor groups are needed to pressure national and supranational public policy making into passing hard laws, in order to back up the shared normative understanding on CLS in weakly regulated areas. Under which conditions these coalitions emerge and how they operate at the national level in countries with weak regulatory frameworks is still an open question.

In sum, the evolution of a global labor governance regime is clearly taking place. The development of a cognitive frame of (un)acceptable corporate behavior is an essential step toward a "harder" institutional setting. Given the experiences of the evolution of labor standards in the context of national political economies, a push for hard norms should not be ruled out. Further research should attempt to precisely explain the nature of the mechanisms by which the global regime of labor standards is being created, as well as the process by which hard laws could be developed.

Notes

1. This article was first presented at the founding seminar of the Center of International Studies at the Jacobs University in Bremen. It has benefited from discussions with my colleagues and from the comments by the anonymous reviewers. I am grateful for superb research assistance by Marina Krestinina and Moira Nelson.
2. For the very broad debate on the effects of linking trade and labor standards, see Elliott and Freeman (2003), Brown (2000), and Rodrik (1996).
3. ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, 86th Session, Geneva, June 1998.
4. Frances Williams (1993): Soft bark and not much of a bite—ILO. *Financial Times*, June 2.
5. Frances Williams (1994): World Trade News—US waves flag for workers rights in WTO. *Financial Times*, March 30.
6. The Economist 2005: The good company. A survey of corporate social responsibility. January 22: 3.
7. See Gordon (2001), Annex Table.
8. CERES, the largest (by its own description) coalition of investors, environmental and public interest organizations, was set up in 1989 to provide socially aware investors opportunities for ethical investment.
9. For the evolution of the Global Compact, see Kell and Levin (2003).
10. Code of conduct evaluations have identified as a major problem the fact that supplier and subcontractor networks are too large to monitor and that not all nodes and lines of the sourcing structure can be considered part of a "network" (Fichter and Sydow 2002).
11. For responses by firms to the green paper see: http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/soc-dial/csr/csr_responses.htm.

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