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UNEP: Topic #2 - The Role of Corporate Responsibility in Global Sustainability

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How can corporations balance profit with environmental and social sustainability?

“Climate change” is defined as long-term changes in temperature and weather patterns that are mostly caused by human activity. Climate change is affecting the hydrological cycle and increasing the frequency and intensity of storms. This leads to death, loss of livelihoods, and displacement; all tragedies that can have major societal impacts. Over 90% of natural disasters are weather-related.¹ As more water vapor is evaporated into the atmosphere, it becomes fuel for more powerful storms to develop. With increasing global surface temperatures, the possibility of more droughts and intense storms has increased exponentially.²

As major drivers of economic activity, corporations play a central role in determining the planet's environmental future. From greenhouse gas emissions to waste management, the decisions made by private industries significantly shape the trajectory of global sustainability. The corporate sector contributes significantly to global emissions, yet also has the power to lead in sustainable energy transitions. Businesses that invest in renewable energy, carbon neutrality, and eco-efficient supply chains have the potential to help mitigate the effects of climate change.

As corporations continue to shape environmental outcomes, the rapid expansion of biotechnology presents new issues regarding innovation, ethics, and sustainability. Corporations involved in biotechnology must balance innovation with responsibility. For example, companies working with genetically modified organisms must ensure transparency and safety to protect

¹ <https://www.unep.org/topics/fresh-water/disasters-and-climate-change>

² <https://www.usgs.gov/faqs/how-can-climate-change-affect-natural-disasters>

biodiversity and human health, and they must align their practices with international biosafety standards.³ There have been many efforts to assist corporations in enhancing these biosafety measures, including the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety: which aims to ensure the safe handling, transport and use of organisms that have been modified using modern biotechnology.⁴

Similarly, the plastics industry demonstrates how corporate responsibility extends beyond scientific development to include consumer behavior, production cycles, and global waste systems. Plastic has many valuable uses in our daily lives, but current production and consumption practices pose threats to our health and environment.⁵ Accumulation of plastic in the environment has reached the point that it creates problems for wildlife and their habitats, as well as for human populations. Often, plastic is mistaken for food by animals. Plastics flood low-lying areas by clogging drainage systems.⁶ Corporations produce, market, and profit from single-use plastic. Therefore, UNEP engages with stakeholders along the plastics value chain in strengthening regulatory frameworks and triggering behavior changes to enable a transformation towards a circular economy of plastics. Through sustainable packaging, recycling programs, and investment in circular economy models, corporations can drastically reduce their environmental footprints, increasing global sustainability.

To effectively address the role of corporate responsibility in global sustainability, it is important to consider the following questions in your research.

- How does your country define “corporate responsibility,” and what does it encompass?
- How can corporations reduce their environmental footprints while remaining profitable?
- Should the global community impose stricter regulations on environmentally unsustainable corporate practices, such as excessive carbon emissions and resource depletion?

³ <https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/biosafety/about-biosafety#ourwork>

⁴ <https://www.cbd.int/biosafety/protocol.shtml>

⁵ <https://www.unep.org/topics/chemicals-and-pollution-action/plastic-pollution>

⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/science/plastic-pollution>

- How can developing countries hold multinational corporations accountable for environmental damage?
- Should governments play a role in enforcing international standards or should it be up to the discretion of individual corporations?
- What role should UNEP play in ensuring corporate transparency and environmental reporting?

Ultimately, the path to sustainability depends on collaboration between governments, corporations, and a civil society. Corporate responsibility is not only a moral obligation but a practical necessity for building a resilient and equitable global future.

I encourage you to reach out with any questions or clarifications as you engage with this topic. This topic is very complex and therefore it is essential to form an opinion based on research that aligns with your country's position on the matter. Be sure to engage with multiple perspectives, and remember to critically evaluate the sources of your information.

Lastly, please make sure that your research is unique and yours *only*. Make sure to properly cite all of your sources and offer your country's thoughts on the current debate over this topic. Remember that all papers will be submitted to Turnitin to check for plagiarism. Papers that are flagged for AI usage will not be eligible to win awards. If any questions come up, you should feel free to email me at atik@mail.yu.edu.

Best of luck!

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