

can be done in ways which range from "self serving internal monitoring" through to "rigorously independent community monitoring" of compliance. In particular, there is a need for independent monitors who can bridge the gap between the expensive management consultants used by industry, who aren't generally trusted by NGOs, and human rights advocates, unions and NGOs, who aren't traditionally trusted by the business sector.

Last year, a number of Canadian companies proposed a Canadian code of conduct for international business with encouragement from Lloyd Axworthy. Canadian Business for Social Responsibility, the International Centre for Human Rights & Democratic Development, EthicScan, the Wearfair Coalition, the Social Investment Organization, Rugmark Canada, the Task Force on the Churches and Corporate Responsibility, Fair TradeMark Canada and others are involved in many ways of looking at corporate social responsibility, ranging from charitable donations to codes of conduct to independently monitored labels.

There is a growing "business ethics" community in both corporate and NGO sectors. There is however, almost no co-ordination, and even signs of a growing element of competition for consulting contracts, in the race to prove responsiveness to growing consumer demands.

Each mechanism, codes or labels, has its strengths and weaknesses and may or may not be more or less appropriate, depending on the product, company and many other circumstances. Experience has shown that, while many companies sincerely wish to do good while doing business, some merely wish to buy time through lip service and resist effective reforms.

A national forum could provide a framework within which all the competing schemes could be placed and allow consumers an informed means of making choices based on those which are closest to their own preferences. One model with possible lessons for a Canadian approach is the UK based Ethical Trading Initiative which is described in a document circulated before the last Learning Circle meeting in Ottawa on February 9th.