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**The Role of Business in Global Environmental Governance:  
Case Study of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development**

The role of private actors in global environmental governance has grown significantly since the beginning of the 1990s. However, only lately the interest in the influence of business on environmental governance has started to grow in the field of IR. This paper reports the findings of a case study on the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD). The author concludes that the WBCSD uses four issue-framing strategies to influence the discourse of sustainable development and the agenda of global environmental governance. Firstly, the Council identifies itself as a “progressive business voice” in order to distance itself from “dirty” lobbying organizations. Secondly, it presents the business sector as the key solution-provider to environmental problems and pursuit of sustainable development. Thirdly, it distances business from government environmental policies and blames the latter for failures in sustainable development. Fourthly, it emphasizes cooperation and partnerships among actors in environmental governance and underestimates conflicts of interest. These framing strategies demonstrate how business sector uses discursive power in order to shape its identity and frame the other actors in global environmental governance. Recognizing these tactics is crucial in understanding the role that private actors have in global environmental governance.

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## 1. Introduction

The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD)<sup>1</sup> is a big business advocate organization<sup>2</sup> that is focused on international environmental and development politics. Its predecessor, Business Council for Sustainable Development (BCSD), became a notable actor in international environmental politics already during the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro,<sup>3</sup> where the BCSD had a central role as the advisor of the Secretary General of the Conference. Since the Rio Conference, the WBCSD has acted as the formal voice of business in many environment- and development-related conferences and has used its resources in influencing the issue agendas of environmental governance.

It has become widely accepted that firms have become significant actors in global environmental politics.<sup>4</sup> Multinational Corporations (MNC) can no longer be separated from states or civil society organizations as non-political actors,<sup>5</sup> and drawing a clear distinction between political and economical power is difficult – if not impossible.<sup>6</sup> Some scholars have stated that for quite some time markets and private actors have gained more power while states have been losing theirs.<sup>7</sup> Others believe that states are still powerful but more dependent on private actors.<sup>8</sup> This paper uses power-theoretic approach, in which instrumental, structural and discursive facets of business political power are distinguished and power is defined as “the ability of (business) actors to pursue successfully a desired political objective.”<sup>9</sup> The involvement of business actors in politics is no longer based solely on so called instrumental power like traditional lobbying or donations to election campaigns,<sup>10</sup> where business has a direct access to politicians.<sup>11</sup> Along with it the private actors have taken a bigger role in global environmental politics through practices of so-called private governance. These practices such as voluntary codes of conduct and private standard-

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<sup>1</sup>Hereafter referred to as the Council or the WBCSD.

<sup>2</sup>Other such business advocate organizations are the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) and the World Economic Forum, but their approach is much wider than that of the WBCSD.

<sup>3</sup>Hereafter referred to as the Rio Conference.

<sup>4</sup>Levy and Newell 2005, 4; Teivainen 2002; Sklair 2002;

<sup>5</sup>Teivainen 2002.

<sup>6</sup>Strange 1995, 170; See also Cutler 2002, 34 on erosion of the public/private distinction.

<sup>7</sup>See, e.g., Strange 1996, 4.

<sup>8</sup>Fuchs 2004, 147.

<sup>9</sup>Fuchs 2005, 774.

<sup>10</sup>Levy and Newell 2005, 4.

<sup>11</sup>Fuchs 2008, 73.

setting bodies are called structural power.<sup>12</sup> The so called third facet of power is discursive power that the business exercises in order to legitimate its instrumental and structural power.<sup>13</sup> Discursive power of a business advocate organization is the special interest of this paper.

Even though a big part of the studies on private actor involvement in global environmental politics have so far concentrated on civil society organizations, the amount of studies on influence and power of business on global environmental politics has grown significantly during the last decade.<sup>14</sup> Still, there remains a lot of unexplored ground. The strategies of influence of the business advocate organizations, like the WBCSD, have not yet been widely studied.<sup>15</sup> This article aims to fill a part of this gap by contributing to the discussion. The aim of this paper is to explore the discursive power the Council exercises through four different framing strategies that it uses in order to have an influence on the global environmental politics. It has to be noted that it is difficult to measure the influence of the business on politics, even though there are also clear examples of it, such as the outcome of the Rio Conference. Here I have concentrated more on indicating what kind of framing strategies the Council uses in order to have influence. Demonstrating the actual influence or power is not in the scope of this paper.

The WBCSD represents over 200 MNCs<sup>16</sup> interested in promoting sustainable development along with their operations. The majority of the members come from industrialized countries. As an organization representing MNCs, the WBCSD promotes the norms of the liberal economic order and holds that the business sector and open global markets can provide solutions to help meet the current global environmental and development challenges. Choosing the WBCSD as a case study of a business advocate organization is justified not only by its large number of members and its historical background, but also by its notable relations with networks involved in global environmental politics. The Council also has

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<sup>12</sup> Clapp 2005, 223.

<sup>13</sup> Fuchs 2005, 778.

<sup>14</sup> Studies on the role of business in environmental politics; see, e.g., Levy and Newell (2005); Ivanova, Gordon and Roy (2007); and on business in multi-stakeholder partnerships, see, e.g., Bäckstrand (2006); and Benner, Reinicke and Witte (2004). See also Chatterjee and Finger (1994).

<sup>15</sup> Although some studies on the WBCSD can be found, see e.g. Rutherford 2006 on business discourses on the environment; as an important business advocate organization the WBCSD has also been mentioned in several papers, see e.g. Dryzek 1999; Fuchs and Vogelmann 2008.

<sup>16</sup> WBCSD 2008, 5, 48-50.

resources to shape discourses on sustainable development. These are among others expertise, status, money, organization and insider status in global environmental politics.<sup>17</sup>

In the next section, I shortly define the theoretical starting-point of this study. The third section briefly explores the development of the kind of environmentalism that has led to the increase of business involvement in global environmental politics. In the fourth section, the case study of the WBCSD and the methods used in the study are described more thoroughly. The last section, before the conclusion, presents the framing strategies through which the Council exercises its discursive power.

## **2. Business and Political Power in International Relations and the Concept of Global Governance**

For many observers, it has been obvious for quite some time that transnational corporations and other transnational actors are gaining in political authority and benefiting from globalization. Still, the mainstream IR theory has been inadequate in assessing the political power of other actors than states in international relations.<sup>18</sup> In recent years many scholars have started to develop more theoretical tools for understanding the relationship of business to global environmental governance.<sup>19</sup> Theoretical approaches such as constructivism, neoliberalism, global governance, and English School take into consideration also other actors than states but many times lack the attention on the question of power.<sup>20</sup> Scholars of the field of international political economy (IPE) study also the power of private actors, and some of them have even concluded that markets have gained power over governments.<sup>21</sup> Research programs on the political influence of business have, however, suffered from the difficulties of proving business' actual exercise of power. This has been one reason for it not to be in the main focus of the IR research field, when at the same time states still prove to be powerful actors in international relations.<sup>22</sup> Still, growing interest in business role and business power in global environmental politics exists also in the IR research field. Lately the neo-Gramscian approach with global political economy focus has gained more ground. The

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<sup>17</sup> Rutherford 2006, 84.

<sup>18</sup> Fuchs 2005, 771; Levy and Newell 2002, 84; Cutler 2002, 33.

<sup>19</sup> Levy & Newell 2002, 84.

<sup>20</sup> Fuchs 2005, 771; Buzan 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Strange 1996, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Fuchs 2004, 147; Ruggie 2004, 499-501.

approach integrates economic, discursive and organizational strategies that business uses in environmental politics. The approach is also bringing the IR closer to the economic research by linking IR/IPE perspectives to orientations from corporate strategy and environmental management.<sup>23</sup> Investigating the nature and relative efficacy of business influence at the international level, three different perspectives on business power are distinguished. These are instrumental, structural and discursive power.<sup>24</sup> Doris Fuchs presents the same “facets of power” in her power-theoretic framework outlined in several articles.<sup>25</sup> Instrumental power refers to traditional business influence on politicians e.g. by lobbying and financing political campaigns or parties.<sup>26</sup> Structural power emphasizes the material structures that allocate direct and indirect decision-making power; e.g. MNCs can reward and punish policy choices by governments by moving investments and jobs. Also private governance practices, which include agenda-setting power and even rule-setting power, are considered to be part of the exercise of structural power.<sup>27</sup> Discursive power pre-exists decisions and non-decisions. It is closely linked to legitimacy as well as on pursuing and creating interests. Here power is seen to be function of norms and ideas that is reflected in discourse, communicative practices and cultural values and institutions.<sup>28</sup> Discursive power constitutes and frames policies, actors, norms and ideas with the intention of socializing “politicians and the public into accepting “truths” about desirable policies and political developments.”<sup>29</sup> Discursive power is especially powerful, because it can be used to enhance instrumental and structural power.<sup>30</sup> Business actors can use discursive power when shaping their identity as well as when aiming to frame other actors and their roles.<sup>31</sup> In this paper the power-theoretic framework is used in analyzing the case study of the WBCSD. The paper concentrates especially on discursive site of power that the WBCSD exercises, even though also the other sites of power can be identified in its activities.

The other central concept for this study is the concept of governance. It has become popular since the beginning of the 1990s. The much-cited notion of “governance without

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<sup>23</sup> Levy and Newell 2005, 8-10.

<sup>24</sup> Levy and Egan 2002, 342. In Levy and Newell 2005, 10 these are called material, organizational and discursive sites of power, but they have somewhat same meaning.

<sup>25</sup> Fuchs 2004; 2005, 774; 2007; 2008; See also Lukes 1974 about the original idea of the “three facets of power”.

<sup>26</sup> Fuchs 2005, 780.

<sup>27</sup> Fuchs 2005, 774-776; Fuchs 2007, 8.

<sup>28</sup> Fuchs 2005, 777-9.

<sup>29</sup> Fuchs 2005, 779.

<sup>30</sup> Fuchs 2005, 779.

<sup>31</sup> Fuchs 2008, 79.

government” refers to the idea that there might be working regulatory mechanisms without the formal authority of governments being involved.<sup>32</sup> Changes in political actors, issues, practices and perspectives are discussed under the concept. The changing political decision-making structures and involvement of non-state, supranational and subnational actors are in the heart of the debate. Still, global governance remains a vague and controversial concept and there is little agreement over the contribution of different actors to it.<sup>33</sup> The concept of governance has gained ground in international environmental politics, since it integrates the field to global politics more generally. Currently, there are several definitions of the concept of global environmental governance, but none of them can be said to be dominant.<sup>34</sup> A wide definition is that environmental governance “refers to the multiple channels through which human impacts on the natural environment are ordered and regulated.”<sup>35</sup> One characterization is that global environmental governance can be used either to refer principally to the UN system of various institutions and environmental agreements or to be linked to the critical political economy perspective, where it is seen as a battleground between the pursuit of neoliberal globalization by MNCs and private organizations and primarily civil society’s resistance to such centralization of power.<sup>36</sup> In more practical level environmental governance can be defined as the field for rule creation, institution-building, monitoring and enforcement complemented by soft infrastructure of norms, expectations, and social understandings of acceptable behavior towards the environment.<sup>37</sup> This definition, however, pays only a little attention to the role of power in global environmental governance. Instead of focusing only on participatory rule-making it is needed to ask who rules, how and in whose interest.<sup>38</sup> In this study the concept of global environmental governance refers loosely to those structures where environmental agreements, standards, rules and norms are created. These include private governance practices as well as international agreements.

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<sup>32</sup> Rosenau 1992, 5.

<sup>33</sup> Fuchs 2007, 1-2.

<sup>34</sup> Paterson, Humphreys, and Pettiford 2003, 1-2.

<sup>35</sup> Levy and Newell 2005, 2-3.

<sup>36</sup> Paterson, Humphreys, and Pettiford 2003, 1-2.

<sup>37</sup> Levy and Newell 2005, 2-3.

<sup>38</sup> Fuchs 2007, 2.

### 3. From International Environmental Politics to Liberal Environmentalism

The environment was seen as only a domestic policy issue in the international agreements made immediately after World War II, such as Bretton Woods and GATT.<sup>39</sup> International cooperation in environmental issues started in earnest in the 1972 United Nations Conference on Human Environment (UNCHE), held in Stockholm.<sup>40</sup> Twenty years later debate on the *limits of growth*<sup>41</sup> had turned into believe in *sustainable development* when, at the 1992 Rio Conference, sustainable development was established as a key term for environmental politics.<sup>42</sup> In Stockholm, both business and civil society were mostly left out of the state-driven process.<sup>43</sup> In Rio, the concept of sustainable development offered business a way to enter into international environmental politics and to adopt a new way of dealing with issues of the environment and development.

From the end of the 1970s onwards, the limits-of-growth-thinking evolved slowly towards a form that combined economic growth and environmental protection. In this process influential international economic organizations, such as the OECD, played an important role<sup>44</sup>. The OECD reports and events heavily influenced the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, called *Our Common Future* (1987).<sup>45</sup> The report is best known for introducing the concept of *sustainable development* to the broader public and defining it as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”<sup>46</sup> The report was one of the mediums that combined concerns for the environment and development and argued for their coexistence. It also asserted that continuing economic growth was a necessary condition for developing countries to rise out of poverty.<sup>47</sup> Economic growth was portrayed not as a villain but as a solution to environmental deterioration in order to gain wide support from the governments. Poverty alleviation, free trade and technological innovation were among the key components that *Our Common Future* and the Rio Conference report included in the

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<sup>39</sup> Bernstein & Ivanova 2007, 163.

<sup>40</sup> Conca & Dabelko 1998, 19.

<sup>41</sup> Conca & Dabelko 1998, 19; Dryzek 1999, 36.

<sup>42</sup> UN General Assembly 1992.

<sup>43</sup> Chatterjee & Finger 1994, 105.

<sup>44</sup> Hajer 1995, 97-99; Bernstein 2002, 196-202.

<sup>45</sup> Bernstein 2002, 200.

<sup>46</sup> WCED 1987, 43.

<sup>47</sup> WCED 1987, 89-90.

concepts of sustainable development and sustained economic growth.<sup>48</sup> These were also the elements that legitimated the broader business involvement.

Instead of constantly being in a defensive position against environmentalists, business started to become engaged in international negotiation processes and to build partnerships with civil society actors. The Rio Conference was in a central position in this development, since business had special access to the Conference secretariat through the BCSD. The BCSD had been established in 1991, when the founder Stephan Schmidheiny was invited to be the principal advisor for business and industry to Maurice Strong, Secretary General of the Rio Conference, and to present a global business perspective on sustainable development. In order to carry out this assignment, Schmidheiny had invited 48 business leaders to become members of the BCSD.<sup>49</sup> In April 1992, just before the Rio Conference, the BCSD published a book called *Changing Course - a Global Business Perspective on Development and the Environment*, which included the *Declaration of the Business Council for Sustainable Development*.<sup>50</sup> Many of the points made in this declaration found their way also to the final outcome of the Rio Conference.<sup>51</sup> The Conference outcome viewed MNCs as among the “key actors in the ‘battle to save the planet.’”<sup>52</sup> The Conference changed the way big business could influence the debate on environment and development. They were no longer simply lobbyists at the national level but, as Chatterjee and Finger suggest: “legitimate global agents and partners of governments”.<sup>53</sup>

Before the Rio Conference, the participation of a group of business people in a UN conference was “unheard of”,<sup>54</sup> and the business participation in the Conference did not always receive a warm reception. The Conference agenda was criticized for being planned by a group of business people.<sup>55</sup> The critics also point out that the discussions about corporations’ impact on the environment were limited, and no global environmental standards on MNC activities were made. Instead a voluntary code of conduct, formulated by the BCSD, was adopted.<sup>56</sup> The close relations between the BCSD and the Conference secretariat were seen as the reason why the Rio Declaration did not include regulations

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<sup>48</sup> Carruthers 2005, 290-291.

<sup>49</sup> Schmidheiny et al. 1992, xix.

<sup>50</sup> Schmidheiny et al. 1992, xi-xiii.

<sup>51</sup> See UN General Assembly 1992.

<sup>52</sup> Hildyard 1993, 22.

<sup>53</sup> Chatterjee and Finger 1994, 111-112.

<sup>54</sup> WBCSD 2006a, 18.

<sup>55</sup> Beder 2002, 269.

<sup>56</sup> Hildyard 1993, 28.

applying to multinational corporations.<sup>57</sup> The lack of regulation of MNCs was also seen to be among the biggest failures of the Conference.<sup>58</sup> The regulation of MNCs might have restricted the freedom of global markets; the idea of the BCSD was precisely to promote the free marketplace and free trade. This direct involvement of the BCSD in the Rio Conference can be seen as an exercise of instrumental power in international environmental politics.<sup>59</sup>

Steven Bernstein claims that the outcome of the Rio Conference (the Rio Declaration) established the norm-complex of liberal environmentalism that introduced the norms of liberal economic order into environmental governance.<sup>60</sup> Instead of embedding economy in society, the compromise of liberal environmentalism embedded environment in liberal markets.<sup>61</sup> This means that market forces and environmental protection can go together and that development goals are best reached with liberal economic order.<sup>62</sup> Bernstein's liberal environmentalism norms include free trade and liberal markets; compatibility between the environment and free markets; technology transfer that is left primarily to market mechanisms; economic growth that is necessary for other goals; human-centered development; the favoring of market mechanisms; the Polluter Pays Principle, and the Precautionary Principle; as well as the privatization of the commons.<sup>63</sup> These are based on the Rio Declaration, in which the same norms are directly mentioned, except the privatization of the commons, a preference for market mechanisms, and using market mechanisms in technology transfer.<sup>64</sup> The same list can also be found in the *Declaration of the BCSD*, which was prepared before the Rio Conference,<sup>65</sup> showing that the BCSD had a central position in creating this norm-complex. Bernstein claims that in the Rio Declaration developmental policies are equal to liberal growth-oriented policies. Environmental concerns are not supposed to restrict free trade and markets, which are both expected to be perfectly compatible with environmental protection.<sup>66</sup> In environmental governance this has meant that market mechanisms and the privatization of the commons are promoted instead of centralized or collective management.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Bernstein 2002, 121; Chatterjee and Finger 1994, 133.

<sup>58</sup> Bernstein 2002, 121.

<sup>59</sup> Levy and Egan 2002, 343.

<sup>60</sup> Bernstein 2002, 97.

<sup>61</sup> Bernstein & Ivanova, 2007, 166.

<sup>62</sup> Bernstein 2002, 121.

<sup>63</sup> Bernstein 2002, 109; 101.

<sup>64</sup> UN General Assembly 1992.

<sup>65</sup> Schmidheiny et al. 1992, xi-xiii.

<sup>66</sup> Bernstein 2002, 101.

<sup>67</sup> Bernstein & Ivanova 2007, 166.

This development of international environmental politics, in which the BCSD was already directly involved as an advisor for the Rio Conference,<sup>68</sup> has made it easy for the business sector to expand its role in global environmental governance and to define its action as part of the process of sustainable development. Critics point out that business has connected environmental management to economic growth and global trade and used this connection as a means to establish business as a solution to environmental problems.<sup>69</sup> The BCSD was founded on the basis of promoting the norms of a liberal market economy, and as Hildyard<sup>70</sup> suspects, the organization's aim was to manage the change that business could no longer deny.<sup>71</sup>

#### **4. Case Study of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development**

The WBCSD was founded in 1995 when the BCSD merged with the World Industry Council for Environment (WICE). The WICE had been created after the Rio Conference as a part of the International Chamber of Commerce.<sup>72</sup> The WBCSD describes itself as a business advocate, “a megaphone for progressive business thought”<sup>73</sup>, and “the leading business voice on sustainable development”<sup>74</sup>. It is an organization of companies, not a company itself, and does not represent the voice of any one company but the voice of an “aggregation of a business platform.”<sup>75</sup> If defined very broadly, and if one uses the original UN definition of an “NGO” that covers anything that is not governmental<sup>76</sup>, the Council could be called a “non-governmental organization”. But in contrast to a civil society organization (CSO), it should, in fact, be called a “business advocacy organization” (BAO), since the members of the organization are not people but companies. While it is not representing civil society but business interests, “advocacy organization” expresses its function better than “society organization”<sup>77</sup>. Business advocacy is here understood as a forum of companies, multinationals and small and medium-sized companies alike, which are together promoting

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<sup>68</sup> Schmidheiny 1992, xix.

<sup>69</sup> Chatterjee & Finger 1994, 129.

<sup>70</sup> Hildyard 1993, 28.

<sup>71</sup> See WBCSD 2006a, 7-8.

<sup>72</sup> WBCD 2000a, 2; 2006a, 21.

<sup>73</sup> WBCSD 2006a, 49.

<sup>74</sup> WBCSD 2005, 3.

<sup>75</sup> WBCSD 2006a, 56.

<sup>76</sup> Chatterjee & Finger 1994, 113.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. “Civil Society Organization”- “Business Society Organization”.

their interests. In the same way as a CSO, also the WBCSD can be defined as a “single-issue group”.

Thus, the WBCSD represents a case study of a business advocacy organization that aims to promote business perspectives on sustainable development. It is an organization that gathers together companies interested in promoting their views on these issues in international forums. The WBCSD provides its members with more influence in forums of global environmental governance than they would have alone. The Council does not represent *all* businesses, and it cannot be considered as the united business voice in global environmental governance. It should be especially noted that the members of the Council are primarily multinational corporations, not small and medium-sized enterprises. Membership in the organization is based on invitation, and members are selected according to their commitment to integrate the aim of sustainable development into their corporation’s business agenda.<sup>78</sup> The membership is not based on perfect track records on environmental issues.<sup>79</sup> It seems that the Council likes to make a distinction between itself, as an advocate for a “progressive business voice”, and organizations such as was the Global Climate Coalition (GCC). The GCC aggressively campaigned against climate protocols at the 1992 Rio Conference and at the 1997 Kyoto Climate Conference and created “ill will with governments”.<sup>80</sup> The GCC was a group of mainly US trade associations and private companies representing oil, gas, coal, automobile, and chemical companies. It campaigned hard during the 1990s to persuade the public and governments that global warming is not a real threat. Due to bad publicity in 1997, companies started leaving the group, and in 2000 it was restructured as a coalition of trade associations, which individual companies cannot join.<sup>81</sup> Interestingly enough, some of the large firms that were members of the WBCSD already in 1997, such as BP, DuPont, and Shell (Dupont and Shell were also founding members of the BCSD<sup>82</sup>) were also members of the GCC (although they were also among the first companies to leave the Coalition in 1997-1998 and only Shell U.S. was a member.<sup>83</sup>). Some of the GCC’s members, such as Ford, General Motors, and Duke Energy, later became members of the WBCSD.<sup>84</sup> The CEO of BP, Rodney F. Chase, was chairman of the WBCSD

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<sup>78</sup> WBCSD 2001a, 30.

<sup>79</sup> WBCSD 2006a, 11.

<sup>80</sup> WBCSD 2006a, 58.

<sup>81</sup> Beder 2002, 238-9. Levy & Kolk 2002, 277.

<sup>82</sup> WBCSD 2006a, 74.

<sup>83</sup> Beder 2002, 238; Levy & Kolk 2002, 277, 285.

<sup>84</sup> See Beder 2002, 238; WBCSD 2008, 51; WBCSD 2006a, 75-76; WBCSD 1999, 29; SourceWatch.

in 1995; the CEO of DuPont, Charles O. Holliday Jr., was chair in 2000-2001 and the Chairman of Shell, Sir Philip Watts, chaired the Council in 2002-2003.<sup>85</sup> These close connections between the Council and a hard industry lobby such as the Global Climate Coalition show that even though the WBCSD aims to present itself as progressive and collaborative – a new kind of business advocate – in the background hard economic interests are constantly present, and neo-liberal economic order lies behind both organizations. From the end of the 1990s onwards, however, the MNCs involved in energy policies seem to have adopted a new strategy: to get involved in an organization such as the WBCSD instead of a “dirty” lobbying organization, such as the GCC.

The work of the Council is based on projects and initiatives that depend on the interests of its members. Since 2008 the Council’s work has focused on advocacy and implementation, and the organization has four key areas that it promotes along with sectoral projects and initiatives. These comprise *energy and climate; development; ecosystems; and the role of business*. Since the Rio Conference, the WBCSD has represented “the business voice” in most of the international environment- and development-related conferences, such as the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg in 2002 and the UN Climate Change Conference 2007 in Bali.<sup>86</sup> It is also actively engaged in preparations for the Copenhagen Climate Conference, which will be held in December 2009.<sup>87</sup>

The data used in this study was collected from the WBCSD’s publications from the time period between 1996 and 2009. The data is comprised of the WBCSD Annual Reviews 1999-2008, the book *Catalyzing Change: the Short History of WBCSD* published by the Council in 2006, and some of the Council’s special reports published during 1996-2009. The Annual Review of the organization includes: letters from the president and the chairman of the Executive Committee of the Council; descriptions of the organization’s yearly activities in its projects and initiatives; and lists of the members of its global network, partners, member companies, the Executive Committee, and personnel. It does not include financial details and cannot, thus, be called *the Annual Report*. The Annual Reviews from these years were chosen, since earlier ones were not available either online or even in hard copies when requested from the organization.<sup>88</sup> In analyzing the Annual Reviews, special attention was paid to the introductory letters. The letters were prepared by the organization’s biannually

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<sup>85</sup> WBCSD.org; WBCSD 2006a, 73; Forbes.com.

<sup>86</sup> WBCSD 2001a, 24; WBCSD 2003, 3; WBCSD 2008, 12.

<sup>87</sup> Pickering 2009.

<sup>88</sup> Werner, Anne Catharine. *Request for Material*. Personal email sent to the author, 23 April 2009.

changing chairman of the Executive Committee as well as the Council's President Björn Stigson. Stigson has served as the President of the organization since it was established in 1995. These letters gave a good overall picture of the organization's policy statements and the development of the Council's thinking over the years.

The analysis of the texts is concentrated on how the Council uses the issue framing strategies in order to influence the discourse around sustainable development and legitimate business action. Exercising discursive power means framing and constituting policies, actors, norms and ideas that precede the formation and articulation of interests.<sup>89</sup> Framing is here understood as a way of defining issues, interpreting the world, locating the blame, and advocating certain policies.<sup>90</sup> It is about interpreting events and occurrences in order to make them meaningful and use them to "organize and guide action".<sup>91</sup> The framing of issues is crucial in agenda formation and during policy processes, since framing can exert a great influence on how the problem is eventually managed.<sup>92</sup> Constant competition occurs in framing international environmental politics in defining what is to be done and by whom.<sup>93</sup> The actor who gets to frame the debate by using his point of view can exercise power over the final outcomes. With its issue framing strategies, the Council is trying to convince authorities and the general public of the righteousness of its cause and create legitimacy for the business as an actor in environmental governance.<sup>94</sup>

As an example of an analysis of framing strategies used by business in environmental politics, I here introduce how Hildyard identifies six framing strategies that corporations used at the Rio Conference.<sup>95</sup> The first of the strategies that both governments and the business sector used at the Rio Conference was to dissociate themselves from the old destructive policies. The second strategy was to deny the conflicts of interest that cause most of the problems. In the third strategy, the global environmental crisis was emphasized and local environmental problems underrated. In this way the responsibility for environmental destruction was placed on all humans. The fourth strategy was to highlight the need for global solutions to global problems, which helped to boost multinational interests of global reach. The closely related fifth strategy was to frame the environmental problems in "terms

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<sup>89</sup> Fuchs 2005, 778-9

<sup>90</sup> Zald 1996, 269

<sup>91</sup> Snow et al. 1986, 464.

<sup>92</sup> Mitchell 2002, 502-4.

<sup>93</sup> Zald 1996, 269;

<sup>94</sup> Fuchs 2005, 778.

<sup>95</sup> Hildyard 1993, 29.

of solutions which only the North (and its allies in the South) can provide.” The last, sixth, strategy was to stress a “crisis management mentality” by showing the need for action as more important than settling differences on what kind of action should be taken, whose interests should be served, and who would have the power to influence such decisions.<sup>96</sup>

The same kinds of framing strategies were also looked for in the texts of the WBCSD. I was interested to see if the WBCSD was using these very same framing strategies that were used already at the Rio Conference. A lot of similarities were found, but instead of using Hildyard’s categorization, I settled on identifying a new set of four different framing strategies that the Council uses and that show how it shapes its own identity and frames the actors in global environmental governance: business, governments and civil society.

## **5. Framing Strategies of the WBCSD**

In this section I will lay out the four different framing strategies that the WBCSD uses in its publications in order to legitimate and advocate the “business case for sustainable development”<sup>97</sup>. In these strategies the link between different faces of power can be seen<sup>98</sup>; the Council uses discursive power to legitimate the other practices in which it engages in to promote business power, such as private-public-partnerships and private governance practices such as standardization (ISO) and certification. The framing strategies are also partly overlapping and some of them are linked to Hildyard’s categories outlined shortly above. Analysis of the framing strategies concentrates on how the Council frames the actors of global environmental governance and how it shapes its own identity. The Council’s framework of the actors in global environmental governance is summarized in the figure 1 in the appendix.

In the first framing strategy, the WBCSD shapes its own identity by labeling its own philosophy as “progressive business thought”<sup>99</sup>. This way it wants to distance itself from both “dirty” lobbying organizations and the past policies of the business sector. With this framing strategy the Council shapes its moral identity as the forerunner of sustainable development.

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<sup>96</sup> Hildyard 1993, 29-32.

<sup>97</sup> WBCSD 2009, 46.

<sup>98</sup> Fuchs 2004, 142.

<sup>99</sup> WBCSD 2006a, 49.

The “progressive business thought” framing strategy also contributes to the second strategy, the “solution-provider” approach.

The second framing strategy is the “business as a key solution-provider” approach.<sup>100</sup> Here the Council frames business as an actor in global environmental governance. It defines the problems and solutions in terms of business perspective in order to influence the way they are dealt in environmental governance. This strategy is closely linked to Hildyard’s framing strategy where environmental problems are framed in terms of “solutions which only the North can provide”.<sup>101</sup> In the WBCSD’s case, one could simply change the phrase “the North” to the word “business”.

In the third framing strategy the Council frames the governments as actors in global environmental governance. It does this by distancing business from governments’ environmental policies. It lays the blame for the failure in sustainable development after the Rio Conference on governments. This is also the strategy that the Council uses in order to legitimate the emergence of private governance practices, which it has been actively promoting.

The fourth framing strategy is to place emphasis on the cooperation and partnerships with all the actors in environmental governance. The fourth strategy is closely linked to Hildyard’s framing strategies of denying the conflicts of interest between actors as well as inspiring a “crisis management mentality”, in which the need for action is more important than settling differences on what action should be taken, by whom, and whose interests to pursue.<sup>102</sup> Here the Council also frames the civil society as an actor in global environmental governance.

### **5.1. Progressive Business Thought**

The first framing strategy of the Council is to shape its identity as a forerunner in sustainable development and label its own philosophy as “progressive business thought”.<sup>103</sup> This label is meant to distance the organization from the other business advocates that use “dirty” lobbying campaigns and hurt corporations’ image by being poor examples in environmental

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<sup>100</sup> WBCSD 2004, 2; 2002, 3.

<sup>101</sup> Hildyard 1993, 31.

<sup>102</sup> Hildyard 1993, 31.

<sup>103</sup> WBCSD 2006a, 49.

issues.<sup>104</sup> Involvement in the WBCSD represents a different kind of strategy for MNCs to have an influence on global environmental politics. Instead of the dirty lobbying campaigns that cause bad publicity for all business, participation in the work of an organization like the WBCSD is a sign of a company's interest in representing itself as a cooperative and progressive actor in environmental issues. For some corporations, joining the Council is probably primarily done more for image reasons than for devotion for the environment, since originally they could not be called very environmentally friendly.<sup>105</sup>

An important part of the “progressive business thought” framing is to assure the audience outside the business world that business no longer sees the environment and sustainable development “as risk factors”, but as opportunities -- “sources of efficiency improvement and competitive advantage”.<sup>106</sup> The Council's slogan for this progressive voice is: “business cannot succeed in a society that fails”.<sup>107</sup> The Council defines “progressive business thought” to include seeking out “forums and strategic partnership”, a “consistent focus on constructive conversation, respect for all views”, and “rigorous thought leadership”. The Council believes that this course of action has “led to widespread respect for the legitimacy of the organization”.<sup>108</sup> By laying out an image of caring, considerate, and authoritative organization that not only talks but also acts responsibly, the Council also wants to build up legitimacy for the “solutions” it provides. The WBCSD balances between the business world and non-business-world of governments and civil society. It needs to explain both why sustainable development is good for business and why business is good for achieving sustainable development. For the business audience, the WBCSD represents the “business case for sustainable development” and wants to “demonstrate that support for sustainable development is actually good business, and it has an effect on the bottom line”.<sup>109</sup> It aims to legitimate corporations' “license to operate” by reminding that business cannot be philanthropy, pointing out that the true “contribution to society will come through ... [the] core business rather than through philanthropic programs”.<sup>110</sup> This also means that the main aim for the Council is to keep up the market-based, business-as-usual structure of environmental governance, where no radical changes in power-relations or resource division

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<sup>104</sup> WBCSD 2006a, 56.

<sup>105</sup> Chatterjee and Finger 1994, 130; Rutherford 2006, 86.

<sup>106</sup> WBCSD 2001a, 3.

<sup>107</sup> WBCSD 2006b, 5.

<sup>108</sup> WBCSD 2006a, 49.

<sup>109</sup> WBCSD 2000, 5.

<sup>110</sup> WBCSD 2006b, 4.

are made. By the “progressive business thought” framing strategy, the Council, however, hopes to soften the image of the organization, which is still primarily promoting the interests of the MNCs.

## **5.2. Business as a Key Solution-provider**

Business is no longer willing to play the role of villain or to be considered as a problem; rather it wants to represent itself as a key problem-solver in the area of sustainable development.<sup>111</sup> The Council uses this strategy, together with the “progressive business thought”, to shape business’ identity and to frame the other actors in sustainable development. This framework is outlined in figure 1 in the appendix. The Council places the business sector in the middle of the frame with government and civil society surrounding it. The WBCSD suggests that since the Rio Conference, the world has changed from a bipolar world of governments and civil society to a tripartite world of governments, business, and civil society.<sup>112</sup> Whereas business takes on the role of solution-provider, governments play the role of framework-providers. Divided civil society has NGOs playing the role of “public trust providers”, with consumer citizens serving as “sustainable demand providers”.<sup>113</sup> The basis for this division of roles is the Council’s idea that for business to work as a solution-provider and for markets to promote sustainable development, governments need to change “market frameworks so that both resources and pollution become more expensive”.<sup>114</sup> At the same time, the Council thinks, consumers need to demand “higher environmental standards from companies.”<sup>115</sup> Consequently those companies “which understand and adopt these trends will be rewarded”.<sup>116</sup> This representation of the actors and their roles is also linked to the Council’s fourth framing strategy, which emphasizes the cooperation and partnerships in environmental governance.

As expected, the solutions that business offers are based on market mechanisms and other norms of liberal environmentalism. The three solution categories that are recommended in the Council’s publications are: innovations, eco-efficiency and corporate social responsibility

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<sup>111</sup> WBCSD 2002, 3.

<sup>112</sup> WBCSD 2002, 3; WBCD 2003, 3.

<sup>113</sup> WBCSD 2002, 3; WBCSD 2003, 5; WBCSD 2004, 2-4; WBCSD 2005, 5; WBCSD 2006b, 3-5.

<sup>114</sup> WBCSD 1996, 4.

<sup>115</sup> WBCSD 1996, 4.

<sup>116</sup> WBCSD 1996, 4.

(CSR).<sup>117</sup> These are supposed to work as ways of resolving the environmental and development problems the world is facing. The promotion of these three types of solutions is even mentioned as the mission of the WBCSD in the Annual Reviews of 2000-2004.<sup>118</sup> Innovations can mean the new technologies that help to solve problems of, e.g., energy production or alleviating poverty. Eco-efficiency is defined as “doing more with less”.<sup>119</sup> This, the Council’s key concept, was invented by the BCSD.<sup>120</sup> The five main CSR priorities, defined in the Annual Review of 1999, are human rights, employee rights, environmental protection, community involvement, and supplier relations.<sup>121</sup> The question arises whether these solutions are more a means than an end, since the Council’s approach can be called a technocratic management of the problem. It can also be asked, if developing technology and elevating efficiency – the same tools that created the problems in the first place – really have the capability to also solve the environmental problems.<sup>122</sup> The promotion of market-based solutions that are often criticized by the civil society actors also shows the contested nature of the concept of sustainable development. For the Council sustainable development equals to continued growth, whereas for civil society actors it usually means more radical redistribution of power and resources.<sup>123</sup>

### **5.3. Blaming Government Policies**

The third framing strategy of the Council is to distance the business sector from government policies in the question of sustainable development and to emphasize the growing importance of business. Here the Council frames business and governments as actors in environmental governance concurrently by downplaying governments and lifting business’ moral identity.<sup>124</sup> The WBCSD underrates governments’ role in sustainable development by laying the blame on them for the lack of implementation of the promises made in Rio and the lack of equity in sharing the economic growth of the 1990s.<sup>125</sup> Governments are not only failing in global

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<sup>117</sup> WBCSD 2003, 9.

<sup>118</sup> WBCSD 2001a, ii; WBCSD 2002, ii; WBCSD 2003, ii; WBCSD 2004, ii; WBCSD 2005, 1.

<sup>119</sup> Schmidheiny 1997, 56.

<sup>120</sup> WBCSD 1996, 4.

<sup>121</sup> WBCSD 2000, 7.

<sup>122</sup> Chatterjee and Finger 1994, 135.

<sup>123</sup> Dryzek 1999, 42-3.

<sup>124</sup> C.f. Fuchs 2005, 790.

<sup>125</sup> WBCSD 2004, 2; WBCSD 2001a, 3; WBCSD 2005, 4.

frameworks, it argues, but seem to need the business sector even more on their home front as well:

Governments find it increasingly difficult to deliver societal infrastructure and services like water, energy, healthcare, transport, pensions and education. The challenges are growing due to a larger and often aging population. In searching for solutions, governments are more and more turning to business for support via partnerships and privatization.<sup>126</sup>

For the WBCSD, these failures of governments legitimize the bigger role of business in global environmental governance as well as the private governance structures that the Council has been actively promoting. The WBCSD claims that business “is increasingly being recognized as a solution provider”<sup>127</sup> and questions what governments can and cannot successfully do on their own. It even argues that “in some aspects business has surpassed government in the pursuit of sustainable development”.<sup>128</sup> The WBCSD claims that governments have failed in meeting the promises they made in Rio, since they have not been able to agree on world trade rules in the Doha Round, establish a global framework for climate change, or proceed in achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).<sup>129</sup> All of these represent the norms agreed upon in Rio: poverty alleviation, liberalizing and opening global markets, and establishing a framework for technological innovations. The Council holds that providing the right kinds of institutional frameworks for “the business solutions” to sustainable development is the most important role for governments, but they have not been successful in even that.<sup>130</sup> The framework that the Council desires from governments includes open and free markets and trade, the integration of environment and pollution costs in price mechanisms, and using other market mechanisms for regulation and incentives.<sup>131</sup> These are in line with the norm-complex of liberal environmentalism that Bernstein describes.<sup>132</sup> By stressing the failure of governments in sustainable development and the important role of business in providing the needed solution, the Council also wants to gain the legitimacy as an actor and put aside the debate on problems and challenges of accountability and democratic deficit that it has<sup>133</sup>.

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<sup>126</sup> WBCSD 2005, 4.

<sup>127</sup> WBCSD 2004, 2; 2001a, 3.

<sup>128</sup> WBCSD 2001a, 3; WBCSD 2007, 5.

<sup>129</sup> WBCSD 2004, 2.

<sup>130</sup> WBCSD 2006b, 3.

<sup>131</sup> WBCSD 2001b, 4.

<sup>132</sup> Bernstein 2002, 109.

<sup>133</sup> See Sklair 2002, 171.

In this framing strategy, the failure of governments in framework-setting also legitimizes the development of voluntary codes of conduct for companies and private standard-setting bodies that the Council has been actively promoting, especially on issues of corporate social responsibility and climate change. These so called private governance forms or private regimes<sup>134</sup> have been identified as part of the structural power of the business, since they are part of the agenda- and rule-setting exercise.<sup>135</sup> This framing strategy thus uses discursive power to legitimize structural power of business. Examples of the private governance that the Council mentions are the Global Reporting Initiative, the environmental standard ISO 14000, and the Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Protocol. These can be defined as practices of private governance or hybrids of public-private regimes, like the ISO 14000, in which both business and state actors have been represented. Business dominated the standard-setting in the ISO 14000 process and it usually prefers these voluntary systems that can save companies from the command-and-control type environmental regulation of states.<sup>136</sup> The idea the member companies of the Council have in mind when they engage in voluntary environment initiatives is usually that “it is better to be ahead of than get pushed around by” civil society organizations or state laws.<sup>137</sup> Expertise and knowledge in, many times highly technical, framework of international environmental policymaking has given business authority – and with it also legitimacy – for the self-ruling activities.<sup>138</sup> In a more complex world governments are seemingly lacking the expertise needed for achieving the needed regulation. Primary goal of this framing strategy seems to be the legitimating of further privatization of now public services.

#### **5.4. Emphasis on Cooperation**

Emphasizing cooperation with other actors in global environmental politics is the fourth framing strategy the Council employs. The Council is here also framing the civil society actors in global environmental governance. This framing strategy is closely related to what Hildyard described as the framing of sustainable development as a common interest of all

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<sup>134</sup> Beisheim 2005, 328.

<sup>135</sup> Fuchs 2007, 8.

<sup>136</sup> Clapp 2005, 223-4.

<sup>137</sup> WBCSD 2006a, 40.

<sup>138</sup> Cutler 2002, 27-8; Falkner 2005, 106.

humanity while at the same time denying conflicts of interest in achieving it.<sup>139</sup> Conflicts of interest are rarely mentioned in the Council's texts. Instead, it stresses cooperation, dialogue, and partnership. These have a much more positive connotation, and, by using them, the organization is representing itself as cooperative and operational in environmental matters. This strategy is also further legitimizing the private governance practices described in the previous section.

In 1997, the WBCSD produced future scenarios, together with the energy company Shell, in order to anticipate future developments in global environmental politics. One of the three scenarios produced can be seen as the one that the Council most wants to use in framing the other actors in environmental politics. This scenario, called *Jazz*, is described as “a world in which NGOs, governments, concerned consumers, and businesses act as partners – or fail. Together, along with other players, they learn effective ways of incorporating environmental and social values into market mechanisms.”<sup>140</sup> The Council defines here the common concern for all actors, concept of sustainable development, as maintaining an ecological balance while maintaining the economic system. Correspondingly, maintaining the economic system means continuing economic growth, while also continuing progress in human social development.<sup>141</sup> This definition is well in line with Dryzek's analysis that for the WBCSD “sustainable” means “continued” and “development” means “growth”.<sup>142</sup>

Continuing to legitimize its own role and moral identity, the Council represents itself as a bridge between business and government; business and civil society; and among businesses themselves. It also frames the partnerships with NGOs as useful for both parties; for business, NGOs work as “public trust providers”, since they possess public trust that businesses and governments often lack. In contrast, businesses and governments have the resources that NGOs need. In this way, the Council thinks, corporations can win public trust and build new business models, and NGOs can obtain resources to work toward their goals.<sup>143</sup> The constant competition in framing the global environmental and development politics can be seen in the Council's divided attitude towards civil society. It criticizes especially those civil society actors that demonstrate against markets, claiming to represent the poor, since in the Council's frame the markets represent the force that can best “serve the world's

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<sup>139</sup> Hildyard 1993, 30-1.

<sup>140</sup> WBCSD 1997, 25.

<sup>141</sup> WBCSD 2003, 3.

<sup>142</sup> Dryzek 1999, 42.

<sup>143</sup> WBCSD 2006b, 4.

poorest”.<sup>144</sup> Instead those NGOs are highlighted that have understood the business perspective and are “beginning to realize the potential of markets as a tool for achieving sustainability”,<sup>145</sup> and that “have concluded that the changes needed to create a sustainable world will not come solely from governments”.<sup>146</sup> Some large environmental NGOs have, in fact, even started to refer to their partnerships with MNCs as “a solution-oriented approach”.<sup>147</sup>

This framing strategy is supported by the Council’s joint initiatives and strategic partnerships with NGOs and international governmental organizations, such as UN agencies. The Council also represents itself as an important convener of difficult negotiations between conflicting parties, for example during the climate change negotiations in 1997.<sup>148</sup> It has represented “the business voice” in many international forums since the Rio Conference and continues to look for such opportunities. Also participation in the preparation of voluntary codes-of-conduct, mentioned in an earlier sub-section, are an important part of the cooperation practices that the Council uses. The work in the Council is based on CEO-level involvement, which makes the Council an authoritative organization among business actors. It, thus, also has extensive connections and networks with other business-led organizations.<sup>149</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

The business sector has engaged in global environmental governance through its own advocate organizations, which promote business interests and contribute to agenda formation in international environmental politics. One of the tactics that the BAOs use is the issue-framing strategies that present business in a favorable light in environmental issues.

In this article the issue-framing strategies of one of the BAOs, the WBCSD, were studied. The WBCSD uses four issue-framing strategies in order to shape its identity, frame the actors of the global environmental governance, promote its members’ interests and influence the outcomes of environmental politics. As a business advocate organization, it wishes to represent business as a central figure in global environmental governance. It does so by framing business as the solution-provider for environmental problems. Business’ position in

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<sup>144</sup> WBCSD 2002, 3.

<sup>145</sup> WBCSD 2005, 4.

<sup>146</sup> WBCSD 2006b, 5.

<sup>147</sup> Beder 2002, 262; Cf. the Environmental Defense Fund’s slogan: “We partner with businesses, governments and communities to find practical environmental solutions” <http://www.edf.org/home.cfm>.

<sup>148</sup> WBCSD 2006a, 58.

<sup>149</sup> See e.g. Carroll and Carson 2003.

environmental politics is accentuated by showing how governments have failed as solution-providers and are actually only needed for creating the right kind of (market)frameworks for business. The emphasis is on the role of business and markets in creating environmental solutions, which is in line with the norm-complex of liberal environmentalism that has become the predominant school of thought in international environmental politics. Private governance practices have become more common where governments have not been able to settle on a regulation or negotiate binding agreements. The business sector often prefers private governance structures over government regulation as in private governance it gets to set more flexible boundaries and usually also control those boundaries. The Council aims to silence the obvious conflicts of interest with other actors by highlighting the cooperation between business, civil society, and governmental organizations. Finally, by drawing a clear distinction between itself and “dirty” business lobbies, the Council seeks to legitimate its message and gain appreciation among other actors in global environmental governance.

Studying business advocate organizations and MNC issue-framing strategies in different policy areas can help to better understand business goals and motivations. In environmental politics, few such studies have been carried out since Hildyard’s study of the business sector framing strategies at the Rio Conference. The WBCSD has gained a prominent position in global environmental governance, and it is therefore important to examine its policy papers and discursive strategies. This has not been done on a large scale before. Analyzing further the framing strategies of the Council could produce a more detailed study of the various ways it uses discursive power in environmental politics.

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## Appendix

Figure 1. The WBCSD's representation of the actors and their roles in global environmental governance.

