

Field Notes for transformation



“Global problems need a global approach. That’s why Corporate Accountability is committed to infusing international treaty negotiations with our radical imagination.”

PATTI LYNN | EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Building a just and thriving world— no matter what stands in the way

Dear friend,

I arrived early in the Geneva morning, wearing the only suit I owned. As treaty delegates trickled into the U.N., I put a freshly printed report in the hands of anyone who would take it. Over the course of the morning, our team blanketed the halls with this document—much to the fury of the U.S. delegation.

The year was 2003. The report was “Cowboy Diplomacy: How the U.S. undermines international environmental, human rights, disarmament and health agreements.” The treaty was the World Health Organization’s global tobacco treaty, aimed at saving millions of people’s lives from the tobacco epidemic. The U.S. delegation was serving George W. Bush’s administration ... as well as the interests of Big Tobacco.

On the final days of the negotiations, the U.S. insisted the treaty be watered down. Worried about the lack of U.S. support, some countries considered giving up on the strong language that would keep the industry out of policymaking spaces, hold it liable, and prioritize health over trade.

But as they read our report, they remembered that the U.S. was just enacting its same, tired scheme. The report showed how, treaty after treaty (including one on the rights of children), the U.S. bullied its way into watering

down the text and then walked away—refusing ratify it. Suddenly, delegates who were trying to appease the U.S. stopped. They aligned themselves with the nations demanding a strong and binding treaty, including Thailand, the Pacific Island country of Palau, and all African countries.

As a result, the global community adopted the world’s first corporate accountability and public health treaty that year. It became one of the U.N.’s most widely and quickly ratified treaties (though not by the U.S., to no one’s surprise). Today, it is helping to save millions of lives around the world and set precedents for other international laws.

Global problems need a global approach. That’s why Corporate Accountability is committed to infusing international treaty negotiations with our radical imagination. We aim to achieve global policy that supports a just and thriving world. Which means, all too often, we need to expose and isolate forces like the U.S. that promote corporate power at the expense of people. It is **your** vision and **your** belief in our approach that allows Corporate Accountability to be fearless.

Binding international law needed to rein in corporations

Even if most of the countries in the world were run by progressive governments, problems like climate change could not be solved by nations acting alone. International law requires countries to cooperate with each other to solve problems that extend beyond their borders, and it is essential to shaping and reinforcing national laws. Strong international law is especially necessary to address problems driven by transnational corporations, which operate across borders with revenues far larger than the GDP of many countries.

Unfortunately, international policy spaces such as the U.N. are heavily influenced by transnational corporations and the Global North governments that advocate on their behalf. Among those governments, the U.S. holds the most power. Whether before, during, or after that moment of victory in 2003, the U.S. has too often sided with corporations at great cost to people and the planet.

And too few U.S.-based organizations are willing to join Global South governments and organizations to challenge U.S. obstructionism. Too many U.S. organizations aim to achieve what is feasible in this context, rather than what actually needs to happen. And too often, that means refusing to confront the U.S.

Your visionary approach to change ensures our political independence

It is because of you, dear partner, that Corporate Accountability is able to do what most other organizations shy away from. Because we are funded by visionary, courageous individuals and foundations that are not afraid to challenge the status quo, we are able to organize for the long haul and take bold risks.

As an example, when we first talked with many of you about our new climate campaign, we told you that

many people thought it would be impossible to kick Big Polluters out of climate policy. Nevertheless, everyone knew if we did not, there was little hope for actually addressing climate change on a global scale. Even many organizations who had given up on the climate treaty agreed that we could not solve climate change without international cooperation.

We believed in the vision of our Global South allies like Demand Climate Justice—that, together, we could reclaim the co-opted space of the U.N. climate treaty to advance just and visionary climate policy. We knew it was a risk to launch and carry out this campaign—but the risk of not doing so was far greater.

Your support enabled us to take that risk. And you continue to bet big on our visionary approach. This is what allows us to organize with our allies for what the world needs—and to move the U.S. and corporations out of the way to make that happen.

Today, as our campaign to kick Big Polluters out of climate policy gains more and more momentum, the U.S. delegation is paying greater and greater attention to us. Which is not a bad thing. These days, I look for actions that will directly confront the impacts of the Trump administration, and I imagine you do too. With your support of this work, you are making it possible to challenge U.S. power and bullying. The U.S. delegation is ramping up its intimidation tactics, but we are not afraid. We know this means we are getting closer to a breakthrough, one that your courageous vision is helping make possible.

Onward,



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