

Global Witness: the media is dependent on NGOs to investigate corruption

Media outlets are becoming more reliant on NGOs to uncover corporate wrongdoing, says Global Witness's new executive director

Tom Levitt

Friday 21 August 2015 07:00 BST

Delving into the murky world of natural resources and corruption is dangerous work. Two people are killed every week, on average, defending land, forests and waterways against companies and criminals staking their claim on land.

Even those figures are likely to be an underestimate, with publicly available information from most parts of Africa, as well as Central Asia, Burma and China severely lacking.

London-based NGO Global Witness has spent the past 20 years delving into this issue to expose some of the worst wrongdoing, starting in the mid-90s with its campaign against the illegal timber trade between Cambodia and Thailand, used to fund the genocidal Khmer Rouge rebels.

In 2011, Global Witness turned its sights on Shell and the company's decision to pay \$1.1bn (£702m) to the Nigerian government for the rights to an oil concession. Investigations by the NGO uncovered \$800m paid to companies with unknown owners and a further \$110m to a middleman, "equivalent to two-thirds of the entire health budget of the country," says Gillian Caldwell, the recently appointed executive director of Global Witness.

And just this year Global Witness alerted Coca-Cola that one of its directors in Burma had links to a jade business, a sector notorious for corruption, military involvement and environmental and human rights abuses, and still subject to US sanctions.

For Global Witness this is all part of its core mission: uncovering the real life impacts of natural resources corruption. But it is one that comes with risks for staff. After its reporting on illegal deforestation and logging in Cambodia in 2007 implicated associates of Prime Minister Hun Sen, his brother Hun Neng allegedly told a local newspaper that if anybody from Global Witness returned to the country he would "hit them until their heads are broken".

Fear of retribution is one of the reasons the NGO is still reliant on its own staff and cautious about working with partners on the ground.

Speaking in the relative safety of their headquarters in central London, Caldwell says companies and national governments are often colluding to obstruct their work: "Companies by virtue of collaboration with local government, police and security forces, often on their payroll, can make it virtually impossible to organise and get the jobs done."

And it is not just physical obstruction. Many NGOs around the world are facing terrorism charges, adds Caldwell, even though they've been functioning as "non-violent defenders" and then there are so-called slapsuits - spurious lawsuits brought to quell dissent. They can inundate you with requests, she says.

So is the net closing on the work of NGOs like Global Witness? "I don't know the answer but it is the case that additional countries are taking measures to restrict NGO activity and access," says Caldwell. At a time when the media industry faces its own struggles, she says their work is arguably more important than ever in holding companies to account.

"The truth of the matter is that media is in a fight for its life, trying to figure out how to pay the bills. How does media infrastructure leverage the resources it needs to do thorough investigative work? It is increasingly dependent on NGOs and other infrastructure to drive the quality and depth of reporting required. The work we do is painstaking and sometime takes many years to complete. Media often can't function that way," says Caldwell.

Working with companies

Although most well-known for its corporate exposes, the NGO has also been known in the past to try to work with companies.

In an effort to ensure that blood diamonds were not being used to fund conflict, Global Witness helped set up a certification scheme known as the Kimberley Process. However, after failed attempts to initiate reform, it quit the scheme in 2011, saying consumers could still not be sure where their diamonds come from, or whether they were financing armed violence or abusive regimes.

It still provides pro bono advice to businesses to help ensure the sustainability of their supply chains, but Caldwell says she is unconvinced of the benefits of many industry initiatives in the area.

"In general we are not confident about voluntary systems involving businesses. Sometimes they work and sometimes they don't and we don't see them as a substitute for binding regulations and accountability. There are times in which there may be an argument for a voluntary system as a first incremental step along the way, but the danger is that a voluntary system negates the potential and opportunity for a mandatory system and that is absolutely what we want to avoid.

"Particularly in area of forests and palm oil we have significant concerns about how the certification schemes are functioning. We don't rule it out. Certification scheme is a very broad term, but there are far too many that don't deliver on the intended aims and vision."

Short-term profits

She has more praise for the rise of more socially responsible companies over the past decade. "It used to be that so-called CSR [corporate social responsibility] was a under-funded office in the PR division of a company. Increasingly it is being understood at forward-looking companies as part and parcel of how they do business."

While CSR departments are growing, Caldwell says the wider economic and business world is still fixated by a "race to the bottom".

“We need to move away from short-termism and the expectation that a company’s only obligation is to maximise quarterly profits, which doesn’t do shareholders any good,” says Caldwell. “It used to be that profits were reinvested in development and innovation and attending to the health, sustainability and growth of the company. Increasingly they are given out to shareholders and companies are falling behind.”

It is climate change in particular where companies bear a responsibility to look ahead at the writing on the wall. Caldwell adds: “It’s the government’s responsibility to deliver carbon targets and its companies responsibility to do some forecasting and understand the environments in which they are operating. It’s called scenario planning; pioneered in the corporate world. Companies should be anticipating the new normal.”

She says that responsibility extends to Global Witness too, with climate change becoming central to their future work.

“We’re not going to reinvent the work we have historically done. We work on forests, lands and climate, conflict financing and corruption. What we are going to do is take a fresh look at that work and better understand where our work is climate positive, where can we extend our influence and where can we make a difference.”

More sponsored features

Topics

Climate change

Deforestation

Corporate social responsibility

Trees and forests

Cambodia

More...

Save for later Article saved

Reuse this content