Introducing ChainReact

*I think we’re going to start to see a new model of civic advocacy where people get together once in a while to protest, but it’s more about an ongoing, sustained engagement in issues, networks and communities about which people care."

- Alex Steffen

Supplier networks touch virtually every corner of the globe. While everyone is familiar with some of these companies, the network itself is largely invisible. Purchasing a device in Madrid can indirectly perpetuate debt slavery in Multan. Unless the supplier network connecting the two is made visible, the purchaser has no way to react to the supply chain’s problems. So long as public data on corporate supplier networks remain poor and scarce, stakeholders are powerless to remedy the networks’ faults.

ChainReact is an effort to make supplier networks transparent, understandable, and responsive, so that companies and their stakeholders can see, react to, and ultimately transform corporate network impacts. The main objectives of the project are:

- Identify irresponsible corporate activity
- Connect issues at corporate networks’ edges to network drivers
- Incentivize companies to address the issues

To this end, we will create an integrated data network supported by three platform struts:

1. A new informer platform (TalkFree) will help advocacy groups manage campaigns to solicit flexible bottom-up reports about corporate behaviour.

2. The world’s largest open repository of corporate information (OpenCorporates) will be enhanced to connect these reports to major corporate brands through multi-level corporate network mapping.

3. An open analysis platform (WikiRate.org) will integrate data from both sources (and others, including direct corporate disclosure) and support their interpretation via collaboratively developed, dynamic, network-aware CSR metrics.

This project is about collaboratively generating, mapping, interpreting, and activating information about corporate networks and their impacts on society and the environment. The network approach is vital because without understanding the complex relationships involved in global supply chains, stakeholders cannot hold the companies they know accountable for the abuses – or the advances – of the many dependent companies they fuel.

The greatest challenge to making corporate networks sustainable is that at present they are largely hidden.

Even the most concerned companies and their stakeholders (investors, employees, customers) have limited understanding of their network’s extended footprint in the world. The fog of complex networks means small companies in remote jurisdictions can pollute and dump and abuse and neglect with the implicit support of indirect funding from companies further up the chain who may not even know they exist. This ugly pattern is clearly a problem for our society and environment, but it can also damage companies’ bottom lines.
Without clear visibility of what happens throughout their supply chain, the companies and their stakeholders are at increased reputational and legal risk, as scandals such as Rana Plaza fire have shown.

For the fog to clear, it is not enough to make corporate networks visible; they must also be made understandable. Comprehensibility, too, is challenging because corporate networks are complex and can weave together control networks (ownership, governance, etc), brand networks (franchises, consortia, etc) and supplier networks (material providers, service providers, etc). Untangling these blends together data challenges, interface challenges, and, in places, philosophical challenges.

There is also a chicken-and-egg quality to the challenge of making corporate networks sustainable. On the one hand, there is often little incentive to gather data about the smaller companies at supplier networks’ edges, because the data are seen as worthless unless connected to brands familiar to western markets, and that requires network maps. But those who begin to work on network maps find that they are generally making connections between more and more companies about which there is very little data.

Here is the deep value of the ChainReact proposal: by bringing together a savvy consortium to focus on three platforms at once, we can much more efficiently tackle a multi-faceted challenge that would defy a more piecemeal approach.