

Philippe Lemoine and Marjorie Carré

Action alliances: making society's challenges a source of creation, innovation and transformation

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F- Action alliances: making society's challenges a source of creation, innovation and transformation

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Abstract. The relationship between the economy and the other spheres of society is changing radically, and along with it, expressions of solidarity and forms of engagement. Among these, alliances between heterogeneous actors (companies, NGOs and “social businesses”, government agencies, Internet actors, etc.) allow for greater fairness and effectiveness in addressing the major issues facing the world.

By aggregating actors with different logics into a dynamic of co-creation, alliances open up new horizons for development. With the Clinton Global Initiative, Bill Clinton set out to encourage alliances to deliver altruistic actions in a way that would be both effective and measurable. The initiative seems to work well in the English-speaking world, but is having difficulty gaining momentum in Europe. And yet European actors are well equipped to engage in new alliances that could transform the world we live in, and have every interest in joining forces to do so. A number of European members of the Clinton Global Initiative have set up “The European Network” to get the ball rolling in Europe and give a European dimension to social commitment. This paper describes the specific features of alliances, before outlining the organization of the European action in relation to the Clinton Global Initiative.

Keywords. Alliances, hybridization, societal commitment, co-creation, innovation, transformation, millennium goals, Europe, Clinton Global Initiative, Commitments to Action, The European Network.

1 Towards a broad movement of initiatives and transformative alliances

A new configuration is emerging in relations between business and social actors. The post-war boom vision, of an economy “embedded” in society, no longer holds sway. Nor does that of an all-conquering economy, permeating communication, education, healthcare and every aspect of our social existence, as it did in the years of neo-conservative deregulation.

We are witnessing a convergence between new aspirations, borne by NGOs and social entrepreneurs, and new approaches in corporate social responsibility. These unprecedented configurations are made possible by people’s determination to be heard as individuals and by the emergence of new forms of solidarity, as expressed notably in civic uses of the Internet.

Today’s economic actors have to take a stance on major social issues, but they cannot do so alone. For multiple reasons, they must partner with others, who will bring in the complementary skills and perspectives needed to deliver innovative and effective solutions. Among the many initiatives that are currently evolving, the Clinton Global Initiative proposes a specific definition of alliances between heterogeneous actors

and a methodology for implementing them.¹ What is an alliance? What are its distinguishing features? Its virtues, its benefits? And how does it differ from the more conventional logic of partnership?

Although we are seeing growing engagement by European actors in major societal issues—sometimes in very innovative ways—fully-fledged collaboration initiatives, whether between heterogeneous actors or between different countries, remain thin on the ground. What is Europe’s position today relative to the Anglo-Saxon world, and the rest of the planet, on questions of societal commitment? What is distinctive about actions developed in Europe—as revealed by an analysis of European “commitments” under the Clinton Global Initiative? How can we engage European actors in the creation of alliances that will transform our world?

¹ Initiated by Bill Clinton in 2005, the Clinton Global Initiative (CGI) brings together hundreds of business leaders, heads of state, and NGO managers from every continent, who share an awareness that businesses’ commitment to society is an increasingly important driver for meeting the great challenges that face the planet, and offers a prodigious lever for growth and development.

To fulfill these goals, the CGI asks its members to commit to deploying concrete, specific and measurable solutions: the “Commitments to Action”. To date, CGI members have implemented 1900 commitments, evaluated at 63 billion dollars, to improve the lives of more than 300 million people in 170 different countries.

2 Alliances between heterogeneous actors (business, government, NGOs)

2.1 Business is in an unprecedented position, which calls for the creation of alliances

Faced with the great challenges of society (poverty, education, health, environment, energy), business currently straddles three dimensions: it can be the cause of problems, it can be the victim, and it can be one of the solutions.² Because it is part of an economic and social system that places individuals in situations of growing uncertainty and makes part of society fragile (with various forms of exclusion, material or psychological pressure, etc.), business is evidently a source of social problems. It can simultaneously be the victim of these same problems, being hit by lower productivity or struggling in conditions less conducive to business growth (insecurity, inadequate infrastructures, etc.). Finally, it can help to bring solutions to these problems, not only through employment and work integration, but also by developing products and services that meet the needs of local populations, including fragile (i.e. base-of-pyramid) populations, as consumers, contributors and creative entrepreneurs.

When business wants to get to grips with societal problems, it is faced with a number of questions and difficulties: it does not have all the necessary means of action to address systemic issues (such as housing), and its legitimacy is questioned by civil society, and sometimes even by its own employees.

To make an effective contribution to finding solutions, business must ally with other actors. Alliances can overcome many obstacles by creating a new, shared process.

2.2 Alliances as lines of force³

By uniting heterogeneous actors, alliances aggregate a diverse range of skills and capacities (financial resources, operational skills, knowledge of the terrain, adaptability to regulations, etc.). This diversity of inputs makes it possible to implement complex solutions that encompass the multiple dimensions of the situations they address: allying with NGOs on anti-poverty projects brings better field awareness and better integration of end users in the design of solutions. Allying with public authorities helps to develop a more global approach, and to conduct concerted actions over wider territories, etc.

At the outset of the alliance, there is a diversity of points of view. It is from this confrontation of ideas that innovative solutions are born: the cross-fertilization of the ideals and knowledge of an NGO with the practical constraints of a

business can be highly productive. It is by sitting around the same table, and by comparing and contrasting differing views and approaches, that we learn to express a case with precision and come up with inventive and pertinent solutions. The power of ideas, when combined with the power of action that corporations have, can be leveraged to achieve tangible development and innovation.

By their very nature, alliances elicit dynamics of collaboration and co-creation. They organize cooperation between actors whose previous exchanges have been limited or negative (businesses, government agencies, local voluntary groups, etc.). But this reconciliation does not come naturally. We all come to the table with our own system of representation, our own vocabulary, and our own modes of action, which will be confronted and altered in the alliance. One must be capable of saying what one has to say, of losing one's temper and of seeking reconciliation, of looking at the other in a new light, stripped of earlier prejudices. This is about more than simply juxtaposing the various contributions from each party; it is about combining them and recombining them to co-create entirely new activities and modes of action. This process of co-creation calls for a climate of trust and goodwill between those involved, and requires particular attention to the modalities of listening, dialogue and exchange.

By bringing heterogeneous actors together, alliances articulate different scales of action, starting at the most local level. Alliances work when they focus on a specific problem, with a specific population, in a specific place (a district, an employment area, etc.) and for a specific period—alliances have a beginning and an end. Moreover, the actions delivered by alliances must be measurable. That is why it is so important, when designing an action, to define a set of quantitative and qualitative criteria for evaluating the results after the program has been implemented and at the key moments in its development.

This mode of action, once situated, calls for a change of attitude towards greater modesty and humility: the most valuable actions are often those that started with pilot schemes (involving 15 people, for example, or a local district), and were developed around a process of iteration, testing and adaptation. Under this logic, the ground-level knowledge provided by voluntary groups or NGOs is crucial for understanding and approaching subjects locally.

When it comes to scaling up, new technologies can play a role in aggregating and systematizing local initiatives at regional, national or even global level. But every situation is unique, and every alliance specific: local initiatives can't be replicated exactly, but they can be linked up with other local initiatives, in order to share and pool whatever can be shared or pooled, so that each action serves to reinforce other actions, and benefits in return from the intelligence and energy invested elsewhere. In the near future, one can hope to see the creation of networks of renewable human energy, with a philosophy of collective intelligence and shared innovation.

Then there is the question of the place occupied by people—notably the beneficiaries—in systems of alliance. Alliances are relevant when they convey a different way of looking at people and take account of the different circumstances in which they live and act. The various objectives can rarely be

² On this point, see Alexandra Palt and Pascale Colisson, *Précaires & clients, l'entreprise face à des nouveaux consommateurs*, 2010

³ The characteristics outlined below emerge from the study of several alliances, including the commitment made by Alain Ducasse Entreprises to the Clinton Global Initiative “15 Femmes en Avenir” (15 Women with a Future), the alliance between SFR and Emmaüs Défi on inclusive telephony, the alliance between Carrefour and the WWF on the use of certified timber to combat deforestation, the alliance of Danone with Grameen Bank, etc.

isolated: for example, the goal of return to employment is bound up with questions of infrastructure, transportation, health and education. And it isn't only the situations in which people are involved that are complex—people themselves cannot be reduced to a single dimension, which is why it is so important to consider them in the round. The economically insecure are also customers, employees are also parents, or militants, people in weakened circumstances also have their strengths, and so on. Better yet, getting the beneficiaries involved in the action, from design through to implementation, is a powerful vector of meaning, effectiveness, and innovation.

Finally, the permeation of a company's core business is a sign of realism and of shared utility: the alliance is not built alongside the business, but with the business, mobilizing not only the social responsibility or sustainable development departments, but also the operating, marketing, quality, purchasing, etc. departments.

2.3 The benefits and positive impacts of alliances

Action alliances generate benefits, planned and unplanned, for all involved. Societal commitment, when deployed through alliances, becomes a source of innovation and transformation, opening up new horizons for development.

For the NGOs and other voluntary sector actors, alliances often provide an opportunity for professional qualification or upskilling in areas that were previously restricted to business (customer support, new user services, etc.). They extend their scope of action by diversifying their activities, and in so doing create new jobs.

For the business, while the benefits (a greater sense of purpose, additional motivation, new learning) are not always easy to measure, they can be very significant. Alliances can create strong relational and transformational dynamics within the company when, for example, it practices skills-based sponsorship: pride in belonging, more rewarding relationships, development of new skills. And alliances targeted at "base-of-pyramid" populations are an opportunity for a company to extend its core business know-how among populations of which it has little if any experience, and to develop new markets.

Another positive effect is that alliances are a source of legitimacy. They establish, from the outset, the motivation and sincerity of the parties in the pursuit of collective goals or the public interest. Committing to a generous initiative alongside other actors is a pledge of authenticity. Moreover, the company may have the power to take action, but not necessarily the legitimacy to publicize its actions, or even to explain them. This can make it difficult for a company to communicate about its public interest actions. Its NGO ally, however, which enjoys legitimacy and credibility, can speak out on the company's behalf.

Finally, alliances between business and NGOs facilitate the involvement of government agencies: while it is generally difficult to mobilize them, it is much easier to engage them in the context of local actions, especially where there is a familiar channel of contact in the form of an NGO, a voluntary group, or a social enterprise.

2.4 The genius of alliances: transforming one another

The form, and the dynamics, of alliances between heterogeneous actors correspond fully with our modernity. Going beyond simple notions of contract, an alliance contains the idea of transformation, changing those that take part.

When you commit to an alliance, you should expect to come out of it transformed, through contact with the other parties to the alliance, and by the new insights developed within it. Laurent Plantier, CEO of Alain Ducasse Entreprises, describes just such an experience in recalling the change that his organization underwent when it rolled out the "*15 Femmes en Avenir*" initiative: "*If we—Alain Ducasse Entreprises—hadn't changed our way of doing things, if we hadn't adapted to our target population and to the other parties in the alliance, our action would have failed.*"⁴

Alliances are like icebergs. From the outside, only a small part is visible. But if you take the trouble to observe the immersed part, you realize that alliances can bring about deep-seated change in the organizations involved.⁵ This is what differentiates alliances from partnerships. An alliance is an approach that keeps moving forward, a close collaboration, whose final destination is unknown. From the outside, all that can be seen is a tiny proportion of the results and secondary effects of the alliance, but beyond the visible action a huge body of work is going on, between the different organizations involved and indeed within each one. The alliance changes behaviors and practices, sometimes in quite profound ways.

2.5 Dynamics of development

Alliances tend to develop in two ways: on the one hand, through exemplarity and dissemination; on the other, by integrating related issues. The exemplarity of an action, and the proof of its effectiveness, may persuade other actors to join in. A commitment from one company may elicit a calling among other companies in the same sector. After the first pilot scheme run by Alain Ducasse Entreprises, 10 other chefs decided to follow his example and join up. After its first year of life, the project is extending its catchment zone to include areas further afield. The "*Femmes en Avenir*" Association is now in charge of the project, and aims to reach out to other municipalities and regions.⁶

At the outset, an alliance's actions will address a specific concern, but as it develops, it will take on board new issues. For example, the cause of protecting certain species of tree rapidly leads into broader environmental issues: in its

⁴Quoted from Laurent Plantier's presentation of the project "*15 Femmes en Avenir*" (15 Women with a Future) at the first TEN day in France, organized by the Modernity Action Forum on May 23, 2011.

⁵The iceberg metaphor is borrowed from Carrefour's Group Sustainability Director Véronique Discours-Buhot, a driving force in setting up the alliance between Carrefour and WWF in the field of responsible consumption.

⁶"*We can change the world by setting an example. Our goal was simply to give other companies the impetus and the desire to do the same thing.*" Laurent Plantier, Alain Ducasse Entreprises.

“15 Femmes en Avenir” – an alliance sponsored by Alain Ducasse

The “15 Femmes en Avenir” (15 Women with a Future) project aims to coach 15 women from Sarcelles—over 26 years of age, many of them mothers and unqualified—into employment by teaching them to cook to restaurant standard. The project is founded on a complex alliance between neighborhood groups in Sarcelles (for the recruitment of the 15 women), the *Institut des métiers de l’artisanat* in Villiers-le-Bel (for the creation of a dedicated sandwich course—in the sense of alternate work and study!), the municipality of Sarcelles (for the creation of a social support cell), the women themselves (for whom the course represents a substantial personal investment) and the Ducasse outfit (with its entrepreneurial efficiency, its culture of learning—peculiar to the restaurant sector—and its sense of teamwork and of respect for team members).

The WWF-Carrefour Alliance: from the fight against illegal timber to “zero deforestation”

The responsible purchasing approach was effectively illustrated when the distribution group Carrefour, in collaboration with the WWF, decided to replace Indonesian teak, which is being logged to extinction, and is hard to trace, with amburama for the manufacture of garden furniture. Preference was given to timber from FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certified sources. Today, many Carrefour “Éco Planète” products, bearing the FSC label, are on sale in several countries. This alliance between the WWF and Carrefour demonstrates that a well-managed environmental approach can create value for business. Carrefour has benefited from the advice and expertise of the WWF to identify, prioritize and manage the challenges associated with sustainable development. For its part, the NGO, realizing that the best way to change mindsets was to integrate environmental issues into the world of business, leveraged the distributor’s reach to get its message across to a wider public.

alliance with the WWF, Carrefour started out exclusively by selling certified tropical wood, and then adopted a paper sourcing policy, followed by one on palm oil, then fish, finally deciding to evaluate its global impact on forests and adopt a “zero deforestation” approach.

In alliances, societal issues generate new dynamics, inside and outside the company. Dynamics of innovation, of interaction, and of transformation. Initially entered into with a view to correcting, repairing or remediating the negative side effects of the company’s activity or the functioning of society, alliances gradually become “positive” projects for those involved, an opportunity to be part of a forward-looking dynamic. The societal issues become strategic opportunities, and an untapped reservoir of innovation. And when alliances become deeper, as we have seen with Danone, SFR and GDF Suez, for example, they can lead to the invention of new services and new processes, and be a fertile source of new thinking.

3 Europe, societal commitment, and alliances

3.1 Europe and the rest of the world

For historical, cultural and economic reasons, European companies have made significant strides on the path of social responsibility, social business and social innovation. Europe is an aggregate of diverse political and social models resulting from complex dynamics of history and geography. The Old Continent has frequently been at the leading edge of innovation in environmental and social fields (from the invention of social welfare and cooperative models to the signing of the Kyoto protocol). The crisis affecting the continent and challenging the system since 2008 has exacerbated the perceived need for a radical transformation to win back a positive and worthwhile future. Against this background, European companies are initiating and developing new types of action that

make their commitment a lever for innovation and development in a wide range of areas, including renewable energies, “base-of-pyramid” approaches, sustainable and inclusive finance, green jobs, and the convergence of social and technological innovation.

Paradoxically, these actions are rarely publicized by their initiators and remain relatively unknown at the national level, and even more so at the international level. Unlike in the Anglo-Saxon world, where it is easier to combine business with philanthropy and to take pride in corporate actions for the common good, continental Europe is slow to give such actions visibility and recognition, and is, ultimately, slow to benefit from them. The small European presence in the Clinton Global Initiative (CGI) is a sign of this phenomenon. The CGI is a worldwide network that has brought together 4000 members since it was set up in 2005. Only just over 500 of them are European, and of this 500, many are from the UK. But while Europe represents just over 10% of the network, it accounts for 38% of the nationalities, revealing a great diversity—which must not be allowed to become divergence.

Societal commitment has not yet become a reality at the European scale. It is sometimes well developed at the local level, and is often embodied on a national scale in actions led by major groups at “corporate” level (e.g. Philips in the Netherlands or La Caixa in Spain). But to date, there have been few cross-boundary projects between EU member countries, and few policies of inclusion and cohesion. The result is a near-total absence of European leadership, both in Europe and on the international scene. Whereas Europe could lay claim to a unique position at the forefront of the great issues of the age, in proportion to its economic and geopolitical clout, it is currently barely seen or heard. The time has come to break away from this piecemeal dynamic and make societal commitment a regional, Europe-wide reality.

3.2 The distinctive features of European actions: analysis of the commitments made by European members of the Clinton Global Initiative

A review by the Modernity Action Forum of the commitments⁷ of the European members of the Clinton Global Initiative reveals some of the specifics of European actions.^{8,9}

In terms of categories of actor, the first thing that stands out is the high density of businesses at the origin of European projects (51% of active members in Europe versus 24% in the United States). By contrast, the non-profit sector (NGOs and voluntary groups) is significantly less present in Europe (16% vs. 32% in the US). Likewise for academic circles (2% in Europe vs. 12% in the US). Another notable feature is the high proportion of alliances formed to implement the actions: 73% of European commitments are developed by heterogeneous alliances.

The European commitments also present a complexity that reflects the diverse range of levers employed. European actions, and their modes of implementation, are often multi-dimensional. For example, an economic development action (for which the levers of action include agriculture, information and communication technologies, financial services, and the emancipation of women) will, for greater effectiveness, include initiatives in the field of education (training), health (public health programs) or energy (investment in renewable energies).

The European commitments often follow the same rollout dynamic, consisting of five clearly identifiable steps. The first step involves discussion and mobilization by the actors; the second involves preparing the conditions (design, creation of alliances, raising funds), followed by a testing and validation step. The fourth and principal step is implementation, which may be followed by a development phase (extension, improvement, development of ecosystems). A commitment may correspond to any one of these steps, or several at once. This is a positive and effective dynamic, because one action frequently elicits another. An actor who has made an initial, often highly specific, commitment will tend to extend it and enrich it by launching other, related actions.

This dynamic of progression takes a long-term view, something the CGI strongly encourages. A commitment is not a sudden flash of inspiration but a lasting project, one that ideally involves its beneficiaries in the defining and implementing sustainable solutions.

⁷ Each member of the Clinton Global Initiative must make a commitment to action on one of the millennium development goals. It must be an innovative action with a precise, measurable target. The objective, scope and duration of the action must be defined in advance, as well as the indicators for assessing its impact.

⁸ Survey of 142 listed commitments made by 82 European members. Source: commitment write-ups viewable on the Clinton Global Initiative website: <http://www.clintonglobalinitiative.org/commitments/default.asp>

⁹ The complete analysis and results can be viewed on the Modernity Action Forum website: <http://www.forum-modernites.org/ten/ressources-docs-ten/European%20commitments%20Analysis.pdf/view?searchterm=commitments>

In terms of innovation, the most advanced commitments are those initiated by two types of actor: firstly, businesses that are transforming in order to fulfill their social and environmental responsibilities; secondly, NGOs or voluntary groups that adopt certain business methods in order to be more effective in their default of action. In this respect, the pooling and circulation of methods, technologies and tools through different environments and the creation of heterogeneous alliances are important vectors of innovation.

Finally, some of the European members of the Clinton Global Initiative have paved the way for new activities that can be classed under the heading of “Creating Shared Value” as developed by Michael Porter:¹⁰ the implementation of production processes that are more respectful of people and the environment, product innovation for new markets, and the development of local development ecosystems.

3.3 Engaging European actors in a project to create world-transforming alliances

To create impetus in Europe, a number of European members of the Clinton Global Initiative, from ten different countries, have signed up to Modernity Action Forum’s initiative of federating a network of committed actors. Following this inspiration, six events have already taken place, in the UK, Eastern Europe, France, Ireland, Sweden and Switzerland, bringing together some 500 participants (businesses, NGOs, social entrepreneurs, government agencies and public institutions, universities, artists and intellectuals), from a score of European countries.

The aim of this developing network, baptized TEN (“The European Network”) is to give a European dimension to societal commitment and to structure a series of collaborative actions: setting up an observatory to identify and highlight European initiatives; creating a forum of exchange to garner inspiration from successful initiatives in other European countries, share projects, and develop alliances; responding to European calls for tenders in the field of societal commitment, social business and social innovation; financing European projects; and developing cooperative programs with European universities.

More than ever, the time seems right to roll out such a network and realize such a project at the European level, but certain difficulties still need to be addressed. Corporate responsibility and philanthropy are in a process of transformation. Heterogeneous alliances are still a neglected topic. A collective intellectual effort is therefore required in order to move forward, and this work cannot be undertaken straightaway in an international language: it needs to be done in the language of each country. Especially as the reality of these topics differs from country to country (the complex relationship between money and generosity in countries with a Catholic background, the culture of mistrust that prevents the development of partnerships, the great variance in degrees of state involvement, etc.); it is therefore vital to start by

¹⁰ Michael E. Porter & Mark R. Kramer, “Creating Shared Value”, Harvard Business Review, January-February 2011.

Two examples of innovative European commitments:

Nabuur.com (Netherlands) gives reality to the concept of the global village by transposing traditional village solidarity to the global scale, via the Internet. Nabuur.com is a web platform that links up “neighbors” (online volunteers) from around the world with villages in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Through the platform, villages and “neighbors” learn from each other and share ideas to find joint solutions to local issues. Nabuur.com is an example of extended commitment: after an initial phase, launched in 2006 for one year, the action has developed over two additional years.

The **“Haiti Exemplar Community Settlement”** commitment is made by an alliance of 3 European members: Digicel Foundation (Ireland), the MacAslan Family Trust (United Kingdom) and the Deutsche Bank Americas Foundation (Germany). Each actor is involved, at different levels, in the reconstruction of a model settlement suited to the specific conditions of Haiti. The project involves 125 Haitian families from all sectors of society in a long-term housing project that uses renewable energies. An international competition has been organized to harness the best design and architecture ideas.

organizing the debate within the specific context of each European country.

The next stage is to organize aggregation and collaboration at the European scale. This requires several components which have yet to be structured: support from European governments; a clear understanding of what is happening across borders, informed by an awareness of the degree to which the initiatives are interconnected and the issues interdependent; and the development of a composite and coherent leadership.

4 Conclusion

The movement now under way is, first and foremost, one of generosity. Like any action directed at others, it tends to be contagious: commitment inspires commitment. But in the case of alliances, generosity is not a one-way street. Each gives to each: businesses give, but they also receive, and this helps to generate a powerful dynamic.

Beyond the question of generosity, the broad movement of transformative alliances and initiatives currently taking form on a Europe-wide scale is a key factor for future growth. The engine of growth is rapidly changing. It is being redefined around digital networks, on the one hand, and alliances between conventional business, social business and NGOs on the other. These two forces are mutually reinforcing, and will radically change the conditions of growth.

The actors involved in building the TEN network, and the Modernity Action Forum which initiated it, fully share a sense that they are preparing for the crucial battles that will shape our future.