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2.3 From Corporate Social Responsibility to Social Alliances: A Case of Childhood Obesity Prevention

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RÉSUMÉ

L'article présente un modèle théorique sur les alliances stratégiques de multiples acteurs dans une perspective d'interventions sociétales. Des entrevues en profondeur auprès de gestionnaires ainsi que des analyses de données secondaires utilisant les découpures de presse et les sites internet des organisations permettent de discuter des facteurs clés : motivations internes et externes, partenariat, gouvernance, ampleur de l'organisation.

ABSTRACT

Background: Close to 2 out of 3 adults in Canada, the USA and other industrialized countries are overweight and obese. This research examines the possibility that firms could contribute to solve this social problem while improving their "corporate brand" and image by moving beyond the current peripheral and tactical corporate social projects to see themselves as core strategic partners of broader social alliances, in which all actors in society partake in the success of what has been called "multi-level, multi-sector" societal interventions (Dubé et al., 2006), while each actor achieves its own mission and objectives.

Methods: In this paper we present a conceptual framework of social alliances based on which we empirically investigate a pioneer real-life social alliance intervention. In-depth interviews with key managers were used as the major method, and secondary sources, e.g., media releases and organizations' website materials, were used as supplementary data.

Results: The informants expressed their opinions on the social alliance pertaining to its external environments and internal motivations of partnership entry, the partnership features and governance, success factors, as well as the social and organizational outcomes. We consider that the alliance represents a pioneering multi-agent social alliance effort by entailing strategic commitment and a relatively large scale of organizational competency. However, there is still much room to develop for a full fledge of strategic alliances in the real practices.

Conclusion: The presentation and empirical examination of the conceptual framework of social alliances will contribute to research and practice developments to support more effective societal plans in which companies play important and unprecedented roles.

INTRODUCTION

Close to 2 out of 3 adults in the USA, Canada, and other industrialized countries are overweight or obese. Obesity has now reached the pandemic status. The progression of food over-consumption and accompanying overweight and obe-

sity has been particularly considerable in children. Considering that the share of the gross domestic product (GDP) devoted to health has reached unprecedented levels and may soon reach its ceiling, health has become one of the most pressing economic problems in most countries worldwide. Moreover, changing the lifetime pattern of behaviors that lead to obesity, cardiovascular diseases, stroke and other chronic diseases requires not only early interventions in the individual's life, but also requires rethinking and changing the societal settings that modulate behaviors. To stop the progression of the obesity pandemic, we therefore have to find creative resources and capabilities outside of the traditional boundaries.

Preventing obesity requires the development of new economic drivers that will lead to the attenuation of the risks posed by the present social environment. Consequently, obesity prevention has to move beyond traditional public health interventions to engage creative and sustained commitment and action from all stakeholders in the society. In this article, we call stakeholders "agents" to underscore the need not only for interest but also for actions for all parties involved. It calls for more effective and increasingly sophisticated coordination among business, volunteer, academic and professional organizations at all levels. Most importantly, it can only happen in a timely manner if it is supported by ambitious novel partnerships among agents in food, physical activity, health, agriculture and business in both public and the private sectors. The objective of this paper is to examine the possibility that companies could move beyond their present limited investment in corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate societal marketing (CSM) to become full members in social alliances where actors from all sectors involved jointly create a society where healthy lifestyle become the natural option for children and adults alike, with each stakeholder achieving its mission and objectives.

Partnership in Social Alliances

In line with recent suggestions by world leaders in strategic management (Porter et Kramer, 2002; Davis, 2005), this research examines whether firms could improve their "corporate brand" further by putting a stronger emphasis on the social responsibility components of their image and placing this at the core of their strategic agenda. This would however, require firms to move beyond the current peripheral and limited investment they make in CSR projects or in diverse corporate societal marketing schemes to see themselves as part of broader social alliances, in which all agents in society, each with their own missions and core competencies but also with investment of sufficient scale and scope, achieve their own objectives and partake in the success of what has been called "multi-level, multi-sector" societal interventions (Dubé et al., 2006).

Recently, there has been an increasing number of partnership initiatives in the health domain, in which public sector, business and civil society seek collab-

oration to tackle complex and expensive public problems (Buse et Walt, 2000). For instance, the World Health Organization (WHO) has engaged in an initiative to promote partnership between governments and non-government organizations (NGO) in the social arena, i.e., the civil society, in order to better manage the resources of national health systems (Loewenson, 2003). Recently, in the context of obesity prevention, innovative partnerships have been formed among NGO, government, and business, for instance, the Clinton Foundation; the American Heart Association; and Nickelodeon Networks' initiative of "Creating a Healthier Generation". In Canada, the intervention "LONG LIVE KIDS", which is the object of the present case study, aims at promoting healthy eating, active living and improved media literacy in children in order to encourage balanced lifestyle and prevent obesity and other chronic diseases in children.

In this paper, we first briefly examine how social alliances, as a more complicated and innovative corporate social approach, yield more societal, corporate and consumer value in comparison with conventional CSR practices. We then report on a case study in which we used the well-established framework of strategic alliances to guide in-depth interviews with managers and professionals in firms, NGOs, communities and health organizations involved in an existing societal intervention that is conceived as one of the pioneer attempts of social alliances.

Social Alliances as a Strategy for Corporate Branding

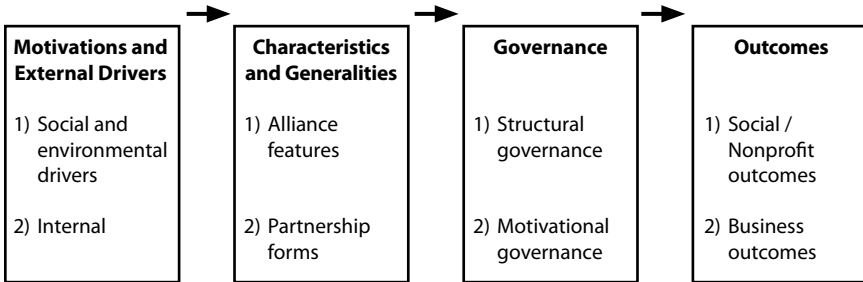
Currently, typical CSR initiatives are fairly limited in capturing the potential importance of social issues for a company's business strategy. Conventional corporate philanthropic practices are mostly diffused and defensive, consisting of allocating piecemeal donations to a specific cause or general national charity with emphasis on gaining goodwill or meeting legal and contractual requirements (Warner and Sullivan, 2004). In conjunction with marketing goals, current popular practices such as cause-related marketing (CRM – Varadarajan and Menon, 1988) and cause-brand alliances (CBA – Murphy, 1997) focus on boosting short-term corporate revenue based on brand-centered marketing promotions. With the ultimate goal of encouraging purchase of corporate products, these practices are often seen by consumers as exploitative while being extremely limited in producing any significant social benefits.

By engaging in a social alliance, a company not only has the opportunity to re-shape its stakeholder environment, where both the company and the society benefit, but also helps build a constructive company image and brand which could play a more powerful role in the brand portfolio than just brand-focused marketing efforts (Rao et al., 2004). By shifting the marketing focus away from product brands to a more integrative level of organizational associations, companies engaging in social alliances may provide more powerful, credible and distinct social and marketing messages than those from other CSMs.

Social Alliance from a Strategic Alliance Perspective

A social alliance can be viewed as akin to marketing based strategic alliances, in which firms have marketing-specific goals e.g., market position-related, product-related, or risk-reduction motives (Berger, Cunningham and Drumwright, 2006). Strategic alliances, which have cropped up in multi-sectors of economic activities around the world over the last few decades, have been broadly defined as relationships between organizations involving sharing of knowledge, resources or activities. Viewing social alliances from the perspective of marketing strategic alliances can provide valuable insights into recognizing and defining the strategic nature and components of the practice and shed light on the fundamental issues underlying the partnering process.

Figure 1
Conceptual Components of Social Alliances



The model of strategic alliance presented is articulated in terms of its formation, implementation and outcomes, and it draws from literature from management (Nooteboom, 1992; Ring and Vandeven, 1992; Gulati, 1998), public policy (Waddell and Brown, 1997; Loewenson, 2003; Warner and Sullivan, 2004) and marketing (Varadarajan and Menon, 1988; Brown and Dacin, 1997) domains. We will present the key features of the framework while illustrating in the context of the case study.

A strategic alliance involves the “pooling” of resources, competencies, capacity and expertise, thereby achieving outcomes that add value to what each party would achieve by acting alone. As shown in the framework, the principles of organizing a social alliance are three-fold: first, the decision to become a partner rests on the specific drivers or motivations that are influenced by the context; second, to find the partners and fit among resources, investment and governance to make the alliance function efficiently; and third, to ensure the highest return on objectives while maintaining a reliable evaluation system. Correspondingly, we conceptualize a social alliance as composed of four major building components: 1) motivations and drivers of partnership entry; 2) social alliance characteristics and generalities; 3) governance and functionality; and 4) partnership outcomes (Figure 1).

SOCIETAL INTERVENTION AS STRATEGIC SOCIAL ALLIANCE

Motivations and External Drivers

One important distinction between traditional philanthropic partnership and social alliance is the juxtaposition of social and economic drivers of the partners when entering the partnership. From the social perspective, any successful cooperation must be driven by real problems and needs that touch all potential partners and it is important to frame the issue based on commonality in decision making (Ring and Vandeveen, 1992).

Beyond the common social goal, companies and nonprofits may have quite different incentives and self-interests that motivate them to collaborate. A social alliance works best when it helps each partner to achieve its individual goals (Waddell and Brown, 1997). Generally speaking, specific individual goals for companies to enter the social alliance can be: building social obligations capitals and fulfilling consumer expectations; building brand and firm equity in terms of catering to product trends and position in a stronger competitive stance; and maintaining community relations and seeking convergence between public and business interests. For nonprofits the motivations often include: fundraising objectives; increased possibilities of influencing public policy and enhanced legitimacy of nonprofit work; participation and building of social capital; improved options for access to public service and greater involvement in public programs. The internal drivers of the government mainly include introduction of new perspectives, technical expertise and capacities on certain public issues as well as increased service provision and implementation of public programs (Waddell and Brown, 1997; Warner and Sullivan, 2004). A social alliance is a process of recognizing and reconciling individual partner interests.

Social Alliance Characteristics and Generalities

Strategic partnerships are thought to differ from past forms of relationships in which businesses simply donate funds to nonprofits or governments, nor defensive relationships based on public protest of corporate behavior. In business, strategic partnerships with nonprofits include internal function beyond community relations, such as production, marketing and recruitment. Nonprofit organizations look to strategic business partners to create programs jointly in which business capacities are critical to solving development problems. The partnerships are built around each party's core complementary competences and distinct elements are brought together such as resource, roles, responsibilities or types of behaviors that are either the true strengths of each party or add value to other parties (Warner and Sullivan, 2004). Previous literature identifies the key assets of business for nonprofits are financial, administrative and technical resources and the ability to efficiently produce short-term outcomes. Key resources from nonprofits and civil societies lie in their capabilities of facilitating community interactions, knowledge about issues and local communities, influences towards

public attitudes, and credibility and experience with a focus upon effective common good processes. The core competence and resource from government authorities are perceptibly to provide strategic coordination through development plans, or give access to budgets for initiating social campaigns.

Social Alliance Governance

Governance consists of the system of rules, norms, and processes through which power and decision-making are exercised (Buse and Walt, 2000). Despite their advantages, social alliances pose complex obstacles and challenges in the alliance management both in theory and practices (London, Rondinelli, and O'Neill, 2005). To be more specific, private and public sectors usually have divergent background, values, expertise, as well as fundamentally different organizational structures. Because of the same disparate value and historic oppositions to each other, public and private sector always have initial low trust and confidence which may largely impede partnership entry and sustainability (London, Rondinelli, and O'Neill, 2005). In building a successful partnership, each partner must learn to adopt a way of negotiation that accommodates the distinct differences and reaches consensus.

Partnership Outcomes

By joining together the sectors, the different interests of the sectors give rise to a creative tension that also leads to innovation in terms of product development and delivery, governance and expression of local values. Broadly speaking, partnership outcomes can be monitored and measured along categories including: 1) the extent to which the partnership objective has been achieved; 2) unintended, unexpected or spin-off outcomes to business and community development; 3) the "added value" of partnership in terms of its organizational and business impact ; and 4) some cost-benefit indications.

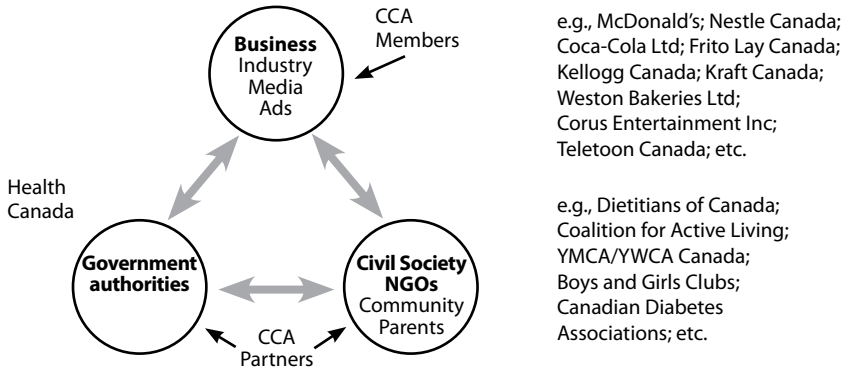
In terms of performance and alliance outcome assessments, Gulati (1998) comments that due to the multi-faceted nature of the alliance objectives, it is extremely difficult to measure partnership performance itself. Further, performance is sometimes asymmetric in that one organization has achieved its objectives while the other has not, which makes it more complex to assess partnership performance. A social alliance's outcomes are even harder to measure due to the social goal involvement and wide scope of impacts. It therefore requires carefully developed measurement tools in order to capture different facets and nuances of partnerships performances.

THE CASE STUDY INTERVENTION

The case is a Canadian national campaign LONG LIVE KIDS (LLK) aimed at promoting a healthy lifestyle and prevents obesity and other chronic diseases in children. The LLK campaign is organized by Canadian Children's Advertisers

(CCA) under the Children's Healthy Active Living Program (CHALP). As a corporate entity, CCA is a non-profit organization comprised of 25 Canadian companies primarily from the food and media industries, including world leading food companies such as Coca-Cola Ltd, Frito Lay Canada, McDonald's, Nestle Canada, Kellogg Canada, etc. The CCA's mission, by working in partnership with government, educators, parents and issue experts, is to help Canadian children to identify and address issues of concern in their lives. Specifically, to alter children's and parents' unhealthy ideas and habits for the LLK campaign, CCA partnered with a rich diversity of nonprofit organizations, government, as well as agents and individuals from civil society. The nonprofit organizations involve agents dealing with children, communities and health issues, such as Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, Dietitians of Canada and YMCA Canada, etc. Governmental support and guidance from Health Canada was also obtained in initiating the LLK campaign. Other stakeholders from civil society brought together in the collaborative network also include communities, issue experts, educators, and parents. Generally speaking, the LLK program represents an industry-led, issue-based multi-agent intervention created through an intermediary of a corporate-based nonprofit organization (CCA) while the members and partners take distinct roles and responsibilities to support and sustain the program implementations. Figure 2 maps the partnering sectors as well as some example organizations from business, government and civil society that joined forces in the LLK intervention.

Figure 2
The Long Live Kid Alliance



The objectives of our case study are to examine 1) the current practices of an example of multi-agent interventions in a real-life context to gain in-depth understandings of the partners' strategic motives, inputs and outcomes; 2) to what extent the managers conceive the interventions from strategic alliance perspectives and delineate the embedded strategic objectives of achieving core business and societal goals; and which aspects could be improved as better stra-

tegic plans; and 3) what implications can be derived in understanding social alliance impacts on public and consumer perceptions and outcomes.

Research Method

In-depth interviews were adopted as the major method for data collection and secondary sources, e.g., media releases and organizations' website materials, were used as supplementary data. The final pool of interviewees consists of 20 interviewees (10 each from the private sector and public sector) who are managers either directly involved in LLK or as organizational strategic decision makers. The majority of the interviewees from the nonprofit sector are general directors of the organizations, while all of the ten corporate representatives are at executive level as vice presidents (or above) in the divisions of marketing or public affairs of the Canadian subsidiaries. In general, case study strategies are adopted when investigators pose the "how" and "why" questions, to describe an intervention and the real-life context which are less controllable by researchers (Yin, 2003). Elite interviews with decision makers in this context are designed to ascertain the decision makers' understanding of the phenomenon, its meaning to them, and what they consider important (McCracken, 1988).

The Case Study Results

External Environments and Internal Motivations

Most of the informants shared a sound assessment of childhood obesity problem and describe it as both a politically, considering all kinds of public policy positions being adopted by NGOs and the government, and emotionally charged social issue resulting from a complex array of causes. The current partnership has effectively accomplished a satisfactory issue-framing process by elucidating and maintaining the program's focus as promoting a healthy and balanced lifestyle while positioning this objective in relation with the partners' individual goals.

In terms of specific motivations of individual organizations, all partners express the motives of seeking certain synergies and complementary resources based on different perspectives of "fits" between the campaign and their organizational businesses. For the NGOs, the current program dovetails with their organizational missions and mandates, e.g., nutrition, lifestyle, and education; their target market or audiences; as well as the synergies of resources and networks such as expertise and research properties in different areas of community development. From the corporate perspective, the partnership embodies the efforts of, according one of the managers, "*finding the intersection between doing the right thing for consumers and the community, and a business solution*". Similar to those of the nonprofits, there are diverse dimensions of alignments along which the current social alliance echoes with the companies' social efforts, especially in terms of the fits with companies' brands, the health-related CSR initiatives and strategic directions. It is interesting to note however, that the current social alliance offers no direct corporate visibility, which has

typically been the most important motive for conventional CSR practices. Consequently, publicity is less a motive in the current social alliance than other incentives such as on-going communication with corporate stakeholders. Almost all partners acknowledge the possibility of opening up new partnerships and extending organizational influences.

Partnership Features and Nature of relationships

A social alliance possesses distinct features which are suitable to solve complex social issues. In our study, the participants discuss the nature of the relationships as well as strengths of the LLK alliance that contribute to the successful on-going program implementations. These include the large-scale and long-term orientation; the multiple resource inputs and synergies; the large-scope network sharing; and the legitimacy of corporate participations.

Also compared to other social initiatives, the LLK multi-agent alliance features a highly efficient allocation of distinctive and compatible resources and skill sets between the public and private sector as well as civil society. In our case, the contributed resources and responsibilities from the nonprofit sector include knowledge about obesity and local communities, representation of credible health information to safeguard reliability of program messages, the ability to mobilize and widely reach the families and educators, as well as the credibility and experience with a focus on effective common processes, e.g., staff development in the area of children, health and school curriculum.

The key resources and competence by businesses can be generally classified into three categories: funding, ideas and expertise, and staff and services. However, it is worthy to note that beyond funding supports, the current alliance involves a higher degree of participation from the firms in the governance of the partnership as well as jointly designing and delivering the programs and being responsible to provide time, and strategic counsel and advisory to develop the PSA proposal. The professional expertise from the large companies and their management experience, especially in terms of financial efficiencies, are also regarded as key organizational resources input in the LLK program.

Governance and Success Factors

The managers stress the importance of both structural vehicles, e.g., a grievance mechanism to resolve differences and procedures for transparency; and motivational means, e.g., trust and confidence building, both in terms of partnership negotiation and program implementation.

In terms of structural governance of daily business, the LLK program is an intermediary-led and central coordinated partnership, with CCA shouldering the majority of daily administrative and communicative tasks. A governance structure

of this kind has both advantages and drawbacks. On one hand, the CCA functionality largely reduces the partnership tensions and conflicts, for example, few respondents report large-scale working tensions during the partnering process. On the other hand, the joint decision-making and working plan process is hard to reflect in the current alliance. Nonetheless, almost all representatives emphasize that such a grievance intermediary is an important facilitator to organize constituents for partnering and to ensure transparency of the process.

Desirable outcomes depend on a wide variety of internal and external factors. Several managerial factors were put forward by the interviewees as important to ensure higher partnership returns. The interviewees indicate factors such as having a strong and sustained funding base; choosing appropriate partners who can add value and credibility to the program; and having a mandate based on science and research to ensure credibility and avoid potential challenges and conflicts among partners. A good process is said to be the requirement for joint decision making and program planning. As indicated by some informants, it is essential to bring in relevant partners at the very beginning of the decision process so that each party has equal initiatives and opportunities to participate in the whole joint planning procedure. A good and sound governance structure in place is also important to enable proper adaptation of partnership as the issue evolves. Lastly, engaging senior level involvements and being pragmatic and action-oriented are valuable in promoting high partnership efficiencies.

Outcomes

In the LLK social alliance, the corporate partners have explicit understandings in terms of costs and benefits associated with the strategic alliance. Several key points were mentioned, such as consumer education, enhanced CSR capability and social networking, and organizational learning opportunities, which directly and indirectly impact on corporate competitiveness. From the nonprofits perspective, the partners consider the partnership as an opportunity to resonate with and enhance their own mandates. Some mentioned it as helpful to complement their current work in terms of messaging; others emphasized the joint partnership assets and outcomes as something valuable that goes beyond their own capabilities. In addition, beneficial outcomes to their organizations are identified as including 1) wider target market reach; 2) expanded networking; and 3) stronger organizational influence.

In our case, a systematic methodology of evaluation has not been developed yet. According to some informants, it is exceptionally hard and tricky to identify proper indicators due to the chronic feature of obesity and the characteristics of the target population. On the other hand, measuring the outcomes or “added value” of the social partnership is a subtle process which can be undertaken with an on-going basis through diverse formal and informal approaches.

DISCUSSION OF THE CASE STUDY

The major results of our case study are highlighted in Table 1. We consider that the intervention of LONG LIVE KIDS by and large represents a pioneer multi-agent social alliance effort.

Table 1
The Case Study of Long Live Kids

	Nonprofits	Corporations
Motivations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fits in terms of organizational mandate, target audience, expertise, and research properties; • Network expansion; • Policy implementation and health policy influence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genuine interest in addressing consumption-related issues; • Demonstrating CSR; • Preclusion to legislative risks; • Consumer education and meeting wellness trends.
Features of partnership: broad base of partners; long-term commitments; multiple and complementary resources; legitimacy of corporate participation.		
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of local communities; • Credible health information safeguard; • Mobilize and reach the families and educators; • Network resources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding; • Staff and service commitments to CCA; • Ideas and expertise in designing and delivering program messages; • Free media “air time”.
Governance: CCA shouldering daily administrative work as general organizer and rarely direct linkages between partners; both structural and motivational governance methods are in place; general lackage of resources, e.g., funding and human resources as the biggest challenge.		
Risks and Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vision or credibility distortion by affiliating with private sponsors accused of obesity contributor; • Possible power imbalance between firms and NGOs out of funding dynamic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suspicions or preconceptions from civil society and wider society for self-serving purposes.
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wider target market reach; • Expanded networking; • Stronger organizational influence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consumer education; • Enhanced CSR capabilities and social networking; • Organizational learning.

On the other hand, we found that to the majority of corporate managers, the primary objective of the social alliance is still dominantly recognized as CSR demonstrations rather than other more strategic-oriented values that can be added, although some managers mentioned customer education and stakeholder networking capabilities. The strategic planning processes e.g., joint decision making governance and outcome monitoring mechanisms are

not manifested during the partnership management as well as the program intervention process. In other words, the potential strategic importance of the social alliance model has not been fully and profoundly considered to its legitimate extent. We believe that more singular corporate strengths such as marketing and managerial techniques and skills, budget operations, human resource and logistic administrations, etc. could be further explored and contributed to the partnership. Further research is needed as to what types of governance are suitable for social alliances with different social agenda.

CONCLUSION

Social alliances have been increasingly advocated as important initiatives for both the public and private sector to achieve different strategic goals. The approach is innovative because it requires companies to engage in enduring and strategic relationships with their business stakeholders. It represents a significant leap from traditional corporate societal marketing initiatives for companies to fulfill their social legitimacy in a more holistic and strategic manner.

Few studies so far have attempted to systematically and empirically investigate the working mechanisms of the alliances and the roles of the private companies involved. The presentation and empirical examination of the conceptual framework of social alliances will contribute to research and practice developments to support more effective societal plans in which companies play important and unprecedented roles.

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