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The Clinton Global Initiative: party on

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The current president of the United States hosted a gathering of politicians from fifteen countries in Washington on 26-27 September 2007 [1] to discuss climate change. At the same time, his predecessor was demonstrating in New York that serious access and influence was no longer the sole prerogative of political incumbents. If George W Bush's conference revealed the difficulties the US administration faces in pursuing a climate-change policy that the rest of the world can believe in, Bill Clinton's show - the Clinton Global Initiative [2] (CGI), a project of his foundation [3] - suggested another route to international credibility: the glamorous fusion of politics, business, civil society and celebrity.

The CGI's event on 26-28 September [4] was timed to connect not with the Washington meeting but with the annual general assembly of the United Nations, with which it has (since the CGI's inaugural meeting in 2005) run alongside, taking advantage of the presence in New York of those members of the world's political and business elite who are happy to assemble under the Clinton auspices.

The Sheraton Hotel at the heart of Manhattan was the venue for politicians, businessmen, academics and heads of non-profit organisations to come together to support the CGI's mission [5] of supporting "commitments to action" that tackle pressing global problems of climate change, health, education and poverty.

Amid the busy networking and frantic scheduling, leaders from many sectors were there to announce their plans or intentions to make the world a better place:

* H Lee Scott [7], the president and CEO of Walmart, explained how his company helped to reduce carbon emissions by offering low-priced energy-saving light-bulbs in its stores

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* Jens Stoltenberg [8] and Jan Peter Balkenende [9], prime minister respectively of Norway and the Netherlands, announced that they will head a committee that will seek (in line with the UN's Millennium Development Goals [10]) to reduce child mortality in developing countries by over 60% and maternal deaths by 75% by 2015

* Robert B Zoellick, president of the World Bank, and Hamid Karzai, president of Afghanistan, spoke to Al Gore [10] about the role of business and the government in addressing climate change.

The CGI event wasn't all high politics or dry policy. The Hollywood star Angelina Jolie delivered a tearful speech about a poverty-stricken boy who cleaned up the maggot-filled wounds of a beggar, and South African cleric Desmond Tutu [11] made a characteristic joke about Burmese [11] activist (and his fellow Nobel laureate) Aung San Suu Kyi [11] being the only pin-up girl in his office.

"I think there is a need for this type of matchmaking", Dorjee Sun, CEO of Australian company Carbon Conservation [12], said. "They get a cross-sectorial group of people together." Sun had flown to New York because his company - which strives to run a carbon-pool, trade in carbon-credits and reduce greenhouse-gas emissions - was encountering problems in securing funding for its projects. He emphasised that, contrary to other conferences he has attended, companies and donors at the CGI would stick to their commitments.

The CGI does not itself give grants or take direct donations; it focuses rather on connecting global leaders (economic, political, scientific, NGO) with the right charities. As the *Financial Times* reports [13], "people and companies are allowed to attend (its meetings) only if they organise initiatives for good causes or contribute money to them." Most importantly, the CGI staff works all year to prepare, develop and track progress of any financial or voluntary commitment the members of the initiative have made.

Some argue that this represents a creative departure from the traditional global approach to alleviating poverty or tackling climate change, which was either governmental or non-governmental. The CGI's combination of the two is the way forward, said Greg Spradlin of the Arizona-based non-profit organisation, Hope Equity [14].

Spradlin's own group endeavours to collect funds online and distribute them to the charity of the donor's choice. He finds a natural fit with the CGI's desire to make "good causes" economically profitable. "It's a great idea they are creating a market. No one wants to do anything for free", he said. "This is making global change marketable for big companies."

Charisma and commitment

Greg Spradlin's reference to the marketability of poverty alleviation and environmentalism is a principle that seems applicable to the Clinton Global Initiative conference itself. It is clearly a forum for good-doers to meet and mingle, yet for many of the participants it is just as much of a photo-opportunity or a PR-gig; a place where CEOs can mix, match and mingle with an enigmatic Tony Blair or a chummy Brad Pitt.

The tension may mean nothing to those merely enjoying the luxurious Sheraton's buzz, or indeed to those on the giving [15] or receiving end of the projects celebrated [16] during the event. But it does raise the question of whether this gathering of global leaders can thrive on its own account, without the aura of its principal architect and emblem, Bill Clinton [17].

Clinton's charisma is the oldest cliché in political commentary, but it is undeniable that this is indeed the nucleus around which the entire CGI event (and operation) revolves. It is generous enough, at least at this stage, to allow the possibility of a negative effect from companies seeking to accessorise themselves with the ex-president's name and authority.

This tension was on display in an incident when the heads of various United States electricity providers hijacked a media room for an ad hoc, unscheduled press conference about their plans to make America more energy-efficient through regulatory reforms; this was halted when an organiser seized the microphone.

For the moment, the synergy works. The headlines and interviews [18] report Clinton pressing the argument for a new philanthropy, for environmentalism to become more profitable for businesses (and for a Clinton succession [19] in the presidency). But the CGI is very young. As an alternative [20] to the World Economic Forum at Davos [20] or an "after-party" of the UN general assembly, it has the personal momentum, the sense of an unfinished project, to survive. But without the magnetism, how far can the CGI travel?

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