

# How VoisinMalin is changing community life

by

■ **Anne Charpy** ■

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## Overview

You live in Grigny, Villeurbanne, Clichy-sous-Bois or Saint-Denis, these so-called 'tough' or 'difficult' neighbourhoods. You speak a little French but, having to answer complex administrative questions on your own, you are hardly able to assert your rights. You are baffled by the bills you have to pay, suffer from degrading living conditions in silence, and feel constantly hassled. Even the schools your children attend, and the cultural facilities and social centres you visit, are hostile places for you, and you increasingly feel isolated... until, one night, someone from your neighbourhood rings your doorbell. Having overcome your initial mistrust, you discover that this person speaks your language, has simple answers to the questions which have been bothering you, and opens the door to this world where you are losing any hope of ever understanding. You say to yourself that this person's work has real value and that maybe one day you too will be part of a 'VoisinMalin' (literally 'Smart Neighbour') neighbourhood project.

Report by Pascal Lefebvre • Translation by Rachel Marlin

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### From Santiago, Chile to Grigny 2

The idea of VoisinMalin came to me at the end of 2008 following an observation I had made when I was in Chile in the early 1990s. Having graduated with a business degree, I worked in Chile for a microcredit project which was quite original at the time, and took its inspiration from the Grameen Bank. Microcredit gave micro-entrepreneurs from poor neighbourhoods in Santiago the opportunity to buy their means of production. This system enabled large numbers of women to pursue sewing or crafts activities, and in so doing, helped to improve their family's life and the future of their children. These women had only ever dreamt about buying a sewing machine, and so when this became a reality, they wanted to let others benefit from it. During the meetings which took place in apartments, the strength of conviction of these women made a very strong impression on me.

My second Chilean experience during the three years I spent in that country was to observe how, once these entrepreneurs had received a microcredit, they spontaneously started meeting in order to implement actions of solidarity and mutual aid, despite the lack of any institutionalised form of professional insurance for this sort of informal activity. I helped to set up a professional trade union of micro-entrepreneurs, an initiative which formally made them recognise the important contribution they brought to life in their neighbourhoods. They then requested suitable premises from the mayor in compensation for paying municipal taxes. They wanted people to be informed about their products, and also asked the mayor to organise a neighbourhood trade fair to publicise their activities in order to attract potential clients. Managing to organise a group project which had started out as individual activities and which then had a spill-over effect into the community life of these people, made me realise that there was an enormous potential for change which these people did not even realise themselves, and that it was undoubtedly possible to emulate it in countries other than Chile.

When I returned to France, I took a degree in urbanism at Sciences Po and then worked for fifteen years for various organisations which focussed on poor neighbourhoods. The first was an association involved in the renovation of private housing with a social welfare dimension in eastern Lyon. I subsequently worked for the French Housing Agency (*Agence nationale pour l'amélioration de l'habitat* which is now the *Agence Nationale de l'Habitat*) to devise ways in which people living in co-ownership residences in poor areas could take part in administrative meetings. I was then appointed by the *Caisse des Dépôts* and the Ministry for Urban Affairs to undertake a large project in the Évry-Corbeil urban area of the Essonne *département*. In this job, I managed a public interest group whose board of directors was made up of people from such diverse backgrounds as Serge Dassault (an industrialist) and Manuel Valls (a former Prime Minister). I then worked for six years for the Grigny conurbation (a city of almost 30,000 inhabitants) as director of the Grigny-Viry-Châtillon public interest group. I was in charge of implementing and organising more efficient solutions for the population in terms of health, access to employment, and education. Finally, I was the director of the major urban renovation projects for the Grande Borne and Grigny 2 (the latter is a housing estate providing 5,000 apartments and lacking financial resources).

In 2005, when riots took place in these neighbourhoods, I was struck by the courage and rallying ability of the local MPs, associations and municipal employees, as well as the way in which the population, which is often discredited by the public, came together, spending nights protecting facilities threatened by arsonists, and 'holding their ground'. In 2008, the Grande Borne neighbourhood started to change with the rebuilding of a school, building work in the apartment buildings, and so on. However, in the local elections, the mayor, who was very involved in this city of nearly 30,000 inhabitants, was re-elected with less than 2,000 votes! I was profoundly shocked by this abstention which demonstrated the population's lack of interest in the life of the community. I was one of the decision-makers in the urban planning process of this city, and it was not easy for us to give a role to these inhabitants who apparently were so poorly trained in handling and understanding complex housing issues. If we had given them some help with respect to the technical, operational, legal and financial aspects, this would have slowed down an implementation process which was already uncertain.

In my work in the public interest group which was dominated by political issues, I had the dual role of mediator between the different people involved and urban designer regarding the urban projects whose total budget was nearly 500 million Euros over ten years. However, I wanted to do more. I needed to invent something to put an end to this lack of interest, and to make the inhabitants become motivated and to stimulate them. Even though they were directly affected by what was going on in their neighbourhood, they no longer trusted the various institutions which had lost credibility and were hardly present in the area: the neighbourhood post office had been closed for a long time; a secondary school mathematics teacher had not been replaced for the entire school year; and the ambulances no longer dared to enter the housing estate. Their feeling of abandonment was well and truly founded. Nevertheless, things were happening even though the inhabitants may have thought that it was not for their benefit. To prove them wrong, the departments which wanted to improve the situation had to meet up with the inhabitants.

Since the institutions were no longer considered suitable, and since some associations lacked the energy, and even the most enthusiastic of their members who had been living in these neighbourhoods from the very beginning wanted to be replaced, it was obvious that we had to invent something which would involve the inhabitants, and enable them to become an active part of the changing nature of their city. We also had to extricate ourselves from the major national programmes which were too dependent on the political sensitivity of the serving Minister, and in which local inhabitants found it difficult to put themselves forward for the long term. Therefore, it was necessary to find a different economic model in order to be able to re-motivate the inhabitants.

### The origins of VoisinMalin

When I was the director of the Grigny-Viry-Châtillon public interest group, we found about ten inhabitants who spoke the languages of the various countries represented in these cities, and who agreed to act as translators, for example between a teacher and a family so that the family could understand the school's remarks and proposals especially with regard to the academic success of their children. We worked on this project despite institutional reluctance, for example from the departmental Prefect who feared that such an initiative would discourage people from learning French. However, we were convinced that most of them were determined to integrate into French society so that their children could succeed. Managing to guide them towards a reading and writing class or some sort of institutional support, which they had not known about, with help from an acquaintance, met their expectations. In one year, we placed about one hundred families in contact with schools.

The translators, who wanted to help others, started to create initiatives themselves. Evening story-telling gatherings which took place in the social centre were translated into the original languages. People who had been unable to understand them before in French could now take part and bring their children along. This made us appreciate the enormous potential of these translator-intermediaries, and we tried to find them a real role whereby they could come into contact with the greatest number of people and also get something out of this for themselves. At this time, I realised that we had to create a 'profession' of intermediaries by giving these people a professional status which corresponded to an additional activity lasting an indefinite period which was also part-time. Because they shared the same experiences as their fellow citizens, these intermediaries would be even more representative of the diversity of the neighbourhoods, rather than being confined to a full-time employee status and attached to some sort of institution. These pioneer *Voisins Malins* ('Smart Neighbours') were of all ages, professions and cultures.

The role of the *Voisins Malins* is to meet the inhabitants of an apartment building by conveying a message which is useful to them in order to establish a relationship built on trust. The message should be in the form of information which will help inhabitants to find a solution to a problem that they are experiencing, an opportunity which they should not miss, changes in their local environment, and so on. These specific topics are prepared in advance with a professional. For example, information about breast cancer prevention was prepared with the Essonne cancer screening association and the regional health agency. Before the door-to-door campaign, the person in charge of the project ensured that there were radiologists close by who would agree, for example, to screen low-income people who had universal medical coverage or received medical financial aid. In such delicate and intimate circumstances,

when a person decides to consult a radiologist, everything should be in place beforehand to facilitate the approach, and to ensure that the original message is followed up with real actions.

The above is an example of a message which can be relayed, but the VoisinMalin association is also able to help with problems linked to accommodation. We work with the water boards regarding questions about water consumption. When VoisinMalin tells tenants that an appointment has been made for a plumber to visit the apartment building, this is after initial work has been carried out regarding the suitability of drinking water (often a source of scepticism), the problems of overuse (because of leakages), or making complicated bills clearer. As a result of the intervention of *Voisins Malins*, people are made aware of certain things which are often essential but are not well-known.

In the Ris-Orangis neighbourhood, there is a cinema and a concert hall called 'Le Plan'. Concerts in this legendary concert hall were attended by the entire Paris conurbation, but not by the inhabitants of this neighbourhood. When it was renovated, the mayor wanted future concerts to be programmed and adapted to the expectations of the local population. Subsequently, the *Voisins Malins* began a door-to-door campaign to determine the cultural practices of the population, for example, the television programmes they watched, whether they talked to their children about them, and so on. One thing led to another, and eventually they discussed the cinema. The inhabitants then discovered that there was a cinema next to where they lived, which was very cheap and was intended for families, and they started taking their children to see films.

With respect to questions about education, at Courcouronnes, and in partnership with the town's 'Early Childhood' department and the 'Agence nouvelle des solidarités actives' (an association aimed at combating poverty and social exclusion), we recently carried out a project to make parents aware of the importance of reading from an early age, and to let them know what was available for this purpose in their city. All the studies show that if young children integrate into an educational group in advance, this will have a major impact on their development and future life. Yet most parents were unaware of the existence of childcare facilities (which welcome children and have very flexible hours), the multimedia library (which has a special section for very young children), and the fact that children under three years old can attend nursery school.

We prepare all these subjects together with local people in this area who train us and with whom we discuss the aims of our project, the nature of the population concerned, and so on. This also helps our partner-institutions, which are very interested in understanding why the potential clientele is unaware of their existence and what they have to offer, understanding the reality of the constraints of this population, and to make the necessary changes, for example, in terms of their presentation or opening hours. These institutions pay us to carry out various door-to-door campaigns. This sometimes takes the form of subsidy requests (as is the case with the regional health agency), but always has a defined objective. We decide on the message, and then the operation is assessed and fed back to the local people.

Our aim is always to meet people in their homes. We are confident that they will be able to live better every day, and we aim ultimately to help them venture outside their front doors. The success of our approach can be measured by the fact that the inhabitants discover tenants' associations, that they come to meetings about their apartment buildings, to meet their children's head teachers, to speak in public, and so on.

## Being a *Voisin Malin*

When we establish ourselves somewhere, we choose large neighbourhoods which are undergoing change, so that we can start off with at least five *Voisins Malins* and benefit from a strong and long-lasting group dynamic. In these neighbourhoods, poverty is often greater than 50%, and more than half the population does not speak French at home. Today, there are about one hundred *Voisins Malins* who speak a total of thirty-six languages and dialects, and go from door-to-door in thirteen cities.

We started off with four projects in Courcouronnes in the Essonne *département*. For our first project in 2011, we set up our office in the local post office in order to help people use the franking and automated teller machines. Afterwards, we organised a rehabilitation operation carried out by a local authority landlord; an educational

programme intended to restore contact between the secondary school and the parents who never visited the school; and, finally, an information drive about the 'Tarification Solidarité Transports' (solidarity transport charges) which provided reduced transport prices - or even free travel - to the poorest population for transport in the Paris conurbation. Only 30 % of the population were aware that they were entitled to this.

On average, when VoisinMalin does its door-to-door campaigns, seven or eight people out of ten open their doors. This surprises mayors who, when they are on an electoral campaign, generally find that far fewer doors are opened. We systematically call three times on every apartment at different times of the day. We let the inhabitants of the building know that we are going to be calling by leaving a note in the apartment hall entrance. The project manager, who knows all the people in the neighbourhood and in particular all the caretakers, has all the electronic entry badges to the buildings. They are relatively simple to get hold of when we work with a local authority landlord, but are less so when the apartment buildings are degraded. When this is the case, the residents' associations generally refuse any type of door-to-door activity and often have a very negative opinion of their residents. The residents regularly experience unpleasant circumstances for which they blame their other neighbours - for example, the lack of cleanliness in the common areas, lack of attention paid to selective waste sorting, or cluttering the landings - and are very pessimistic that our door-to-door activity will change these practices which they dislike.

From our experience, we have noticed that, on the contrary, when people understand the reason why they should do something and that they will not be the only ones doing it, they accept that perhaps it is worth their while doing it after all. It is necessary to make the inhabitants and the managers understand that this responsibility is shared, and that both sides have to make an effort. For example, if the landlord does not supply the appropriate dustbins for selective waste, if the caretaker does not take them out in time for collection, and if they are not emptied regularly, then there is no point in making the inhabitants aware of selective waste disposal. On the other hand, if everyone 'plays the game', then this will make for peaceful neighbourly relations and the required results will be achieved.

All the *Voisins Malins* have permanent contracts with part-time schedules amounting to about twenty hours per month. Each one has a monthly net salary of between 150 and 200 Euros. We come under the collective labour agreement applied to people working in the social and family-based sectors ('Convention collective nationale des acteurs du lien social et familial') which allows us to provide these sorts of contracts. The amount is an income supplement, and we do not see it in any way as a means of solving the employment problem. However, this professional revenue allows us to hire a large variety of people, ranging from students living in the neighbourhood who want to 'give back' something which they themselves received, to mothers who have been living in their neighbourhoods for a long time and have practically never ventured outside their local area. This professional status and income give them access to state aid. Bringing home 200 Euros is a very welcome bonus, raising their profile both in their own eyes and in their role as the backbone of the family. Furthermore, for many people this is a stepping stone towards a professional life or some sort of professional stability compared with when they had only been able to take on insecure or temporary jobs. It is an opportunity to develop self-confidence which was not possible in their previous situation, and offers new possibilities to learn and to think in particular about subjects which they have to present to the inhabitants.

## VoisinMalin's structure

The actions taken by the *Voisins Malins* rely on a very structured organisation which is centred around the activity of the neighbourhood manager. The manager has to find his place among a large number of people involved in the local community, understand the way in which the local economy works, and identify its 'people resources': these may include the neighbourhood doctor who knows all the families, the grocer who has premises on the ground floor of the apartment building, the librarian, or the secondary school educational adviser. He then has to create a network of people and inform them about VoisinMalin so that these 'people resources' can talk about VoisinMalin to other people and in return, recommend us to potential candidates. In order to work with trustworthy people, we co-opt people before signing contracts.

We have to make sure that VoisinMalin does not ‘crush’ anyone. When an association does door-to-door canvassing, which, in general, does not last very long, we give it priority and temporarily redirect our activity. The manager’s main role is to understand the needs and resources in the neighbourhood where we are active in order to develop our legitimacy.

His other role is to develop projects with the other key people in the neighbourhood. He attempts to determine the concerns of the mayor, the local authority landlord, the regional health agency, EDF and ENGIE, and any changes they might want to make. In order to develop the project, he then has to determine the subjects which must be sufficiently important to have an impact on people’s lives, and then will arrange for us to go to meet them. We can also make our own assessments and create new projects ourselves but this requires us to show that we have a certain amount of experience before implementing them. When this is the case, the manager gets quotes, draws up the employment agreements and partnerships, and manages the financial side.

The manager’s third task, which justifies his name, is to find the *Voisins Malins*, put them on the payroll, train them, assist them and help them to improve their skills. He should also supervise the team. To do so, he brings the team members together once a month in the evening for a two-hour meeting and goes through their door-to-door experiences with them. This is the opportunity for the manager to understand everything which has taken place, help the *Voisins Malins* express their feelings about their activity, and give them advice. He also talks to them individually once a month. We now have fourteen project managers based in the four cities in Essonne, five cities in the Seine-Saint-Denis *département*, in Paris’ 19<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, as well as in Villiers-Le-Bel, Lille, Villeurbanne and Marseille.

The backgrounds of these managers are as varied as those of the *Voisins Malins*. Three of them studied at Sciences Po and others have degrees from business schools or law schools. We also have a social worker who is 58 years old, and is a leading light in an association and comes from a low-income neighbourhood and now has a Master’s degree, having taken up his studies later on in life. We rely a great deal on such a variety of people in order to develop our collective intelligence. Even though they are, in terms of their level of studies, less well paid than if they had pursued careers in the private sector, initially their salary is completely in line with other salaries in the voluntary sector and the social economy. Their financial difficulties emerge when they start having a family to support, especially if they are living in the Paris region.

Over a period of seven years, we have met nearly fifty thousand families, approximately one hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants. We see them once or twice a year. Clearly, we are not able to guide them: we just try to encourage them to consider contacting various local bodies which can meet their expectations. Nevertheless, others, who are more fragile, put their trust in their *Voisin Malin* but need to be helped even more in order to be able to take these steps. Sometimes we put them in contact with a neighbour in their building. We also try to create a long-lasting relationship based on trust by visiting them more often, but this takes time. We are still thinking about ways in which we can help them more specifically. In collaboration with the AG2R-La Mondiale insurance company, we have launched a programme to identify elderly, isolated people. This population represents approximately 10 % of our door-to-door contacts. In some cases, for example, when someone is dying of starvation or in situations where there is child abuse, the *Voisin Malin* immediately talks to his manager who alerts either the emergency services or child protection services, whichever is the more relevant in the light of the situation.

## Development perspectives

Today our priority is to intensify our actions in neighbourhoods where we are already working by pursuing existing projects. Currently we are debating our role where we do not have projects in a specific neighbourhood. For example, in the Grande Borne neighbourhood in Grigny, since most people there do not always have a proper diet, we carried out a health awareness campaign. The next stage, in order to provide a quality, healthy diet there, would be to transpose a project which already exists in our centre in Vaulx-en-Velin. This project consists of creating a co-operative managed by the inhabitants living in the buildings who sell essential produce which come from nearby farms (including vegetables, cheese and butter). When this sort of activity works, it could lead to other similar efforts, such as the establishment of a micro-insurance scheme, purchasing groups, and so on.



The trust which the inhabitants can have in their *Voisins Malins* helps to pinpoint their needs because of the answers which they give in our surveys. Subsequently we can determine which are the most suitable people outside the neighbourhood, put them in touch with the right people within the neighbourhood (such as the local authority landlord if the need is to find premises for example), and then make people aware of the project while it is being implemented. There are also business areas near the neighbourhoods where we are active, but where no contact is possible because the residents do not know how to approach them and do not dare to do so even though they would like to. At this moment in time, when many companies are considering skill-based sponsorships or voluntary work, we hope to be able to organise these business area employees who, for example during their lunch-break, might be able to be on site with the inhabitants. This would create an opportunity to meet up around a project which is useful to the neighbourhood.

Our second development focus is our geographical expansion. We are approached by a number of people who request our presence in their neighbourhoods, and consequently we would like to reach a critical size which would allow us to have an impact in national policies. Currently in France there are two hundred neighbourhoods undergoing urban renewal. This national programme affects approximately two million inhabitants. We think that we will reach this critical size when we will be able to be in contact with 20 % of these inhabitants three years from now. To achieve this goal, we are opening three new neighbourhood projects per year in the largest urban areas. We are expanding our activity in the Lille area by starting a new project in neighbouring Roubaix. Around our base in Villeurbanne, we are going to set up centres in Vénissieux and Vaulx-en-Velin. We also have development projects in Marseille where there will be three managers, as well as in Nantes, Bordeaux, Nancy and Metz. In the long term, there will be a total of about two hundred *Voisins Malins*. When we reach this number, we will stop expanding as I have absolutely no intention of being in charge of three thousand employees!

On the other hand, we have noted that many other socially-oriented organisations would like to reproduce our model elsewhere. Therefore, we have started to try out training programmes at La Courneuve, with renters' associations who did not know what strategy to adopt, how to gain legitimacy in the inhabitants' eyes, or how to use local resources. We organised four training sessions which they greatly appreciated. In Villeurbanne, *VoisinMalin* joined forces with a structure which has a '*Territoires zéro chômeur de longue durée*<sup>1</sup>' ('Areas with no long-term unemployment') initiative in the Saint-Jean neighbourhood by recruiting unemployed people on a full-time basis in order to set up activities which do not compete with ours in their neighbourhood. This initiative was intended for some of its employees to become *Voisins Malins* on a voluntary basis, and that their manager would be one of our employees. They spend fifteen hours of their work time every month working as *Voisin Malins*. They do not work after 6pm or at week-ends which are the times when our door-to-door activity is most efficient. Nevertheless, this is a very interesting approach and it allows us to put things in perspective.

Two years ago, in Barcelona, the members of a large association of neighbours created during Franco's regime as a means of resistance and defiance in the neighbourhoods, was looking for a second wind. They contacted us in order to integrate the *VoisinMalin* model into their neighbourhood, and therefore find new legitimacy. I trusted them immediately. We helped them to find their first managers and to develop their initial partnerships by sharing our know-how and experiences. They started door-to-door activities a year ago, questioning residents about their uncertain energy resources in neighbourhoods which are very similar to ours. Often the inhabitants, who do not have the right to accommodation as a result of the real estate crisis, are very wary about opening their doors to strangers for fear that they could be bailiffs. We signed a common charter on the values which we share and the fundamental issues of the project, and we have also drawn up an operational partnership agreement whereby we advise them and sell our expertise.

The diversity of the *Voisins Malins* teams allows us not only to have numerous meetings by the simple nature of our projects, but within the teams there is a very strong solidarity and family spirit between the young students – even high school students –, the retired, mothers who rarely step outside their own front doors, ex-trade

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1. Patrick Valentin and Michel de Virville, 'The campaign for zero regional long-term unemployment', 'Economy and Meaning' seminar, École de Paris du management, January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

unionists, and so on. This fosters the creation of a common direction and identity within this diversity which is part of the essence of VoisinMalin.

## Discussion



**Question:** *You describe a very cruel world in which disadvantaged people are powerless in the face of laws and rules. With your warm humanity, you create relationships which make this world accessible to them, and, conversely, you make this hard world human by giving it a face. How do you deal with these contradictions?*

**Anne Charpy:** Being in charge of a company brings with it major constraints. I manage more than one hundred employees and the company is growing by more than 50 % every year. At the same time, our role is to help people grow professionally. I constantly have to make choices. In my teams there are people whose job is to find the financial backing, develop methods, and so on. Some of them, who previously worked in companies, want the formal ‘processes’ and ‘reporting’ to account for what we are doing in the field and let us benefit from their experience. They work with managers who are in the neighbourhood, and in the course of their work meet caretakers of the buildings and spend time discussing problems informally with them, which helps them to learn about the nightmare conditions of some inhabitants who have been living without heat or hot water for a week. These casual discussions, which may seem unproductive, are essential in order for the managers to alert the mayor or the social landlord about these sorts of emergencies.

**Q.:** *Do the Voisins Malins go inside the residents’ apartments?*

**A. C.:** That depends on the *Voisins Malins* and the inhabitants. When they go from door-to-door – and the *Voisins Malins* are the only people who do this –, they never know what to expect, and sometimes the people they meet are aggressive. Some women who live alone are often very wary and do not open the door. Some *Voisins Malins* are relaxed, others are more timid and this is important. We do not ask them to go into the apartments because this is not our main objective, but it may gradually come about. We do, however, hope to remain discrete so that everyone feels at ease. Talking about some subjects, like cancer for example, is not appropriate in a hallway or on a landing and requires a degree of privacy. Often, we use intermediaries such as neighbours whom we have already contacted who are happy with the situation, and this encourages a climate of trust.

**Q.:** *How do you prepare the information or the messages you want to convey?*

**A. C.:** Our method relies on people’s desire to act in order to improve the way of life in their neighbourhoods. This is our way of doing things. If we impose a way of doing something, or if we organise information or messages without them, they may lose interest or become less invested and we may lose this resource. The *Voisins Malins* are only able to convince people about the message if firstly they believe in it. Clearly, part of the way to convey the messages is formalised, but the rest is up to the them to use their intelligence which best relates to the situation in the neighbourhoods. Our challenge is to be the most apposite we can without losing our uniqueness.

**Q.:** *Do the Voisins Malins have any equipment when they go from door-to-door?*

**A. C.:** All of them now have iPads. I do not want to have everything digitalised in the company, but I realise that in this age where all the texts and legal information are available on the Internet, it is essential to be able to



answer questions quickly about their rights when we visit them, or about other subjects which are not necessarily the reason for our visit. Therefore, the *Voisins Malins*, a third of whom had never used the Internet before and did not have an email address, had to train themselves and get used to this digital world, so that when they meet inhabitants – armed with their iPads – they can reassure them through their own experience that this modern Internet world is accessible to them too.

## Making a place for ourselves

**Q.:** *In poor areas, there is often a small population of drug dealers and offenders who 'lay down the law' and do not appreciate outsiders coming into their neighbourhoods. How have you coped with this?*

**A. C.:** Before we go door-to-door, the manager takes a great deal of time to meet everybody. In order for the inhabitants to know who he is, he spends time with the young people in the neighbourhood, those in charge of local associations, and so on. The most seasoned *Voisins Malins* go directly to the drug dealers and let them know that the *Voisins Malins* are not there to disturb them, and that they consist of teams of mothers or people who have been in the neighbourhood a long time who go from door-to-door in order to help people. Since they all live in the neighbourhood, they know how they have to behave and what to do. When the *Voisins Malins* go into a building which they know is very 'difficult', they go in teams of two, and try to learn beforehand the location of the occupants whom they should not 'disturb'. If a *Voisin Malin* notices a situation which is particularly problematic, where a person is suffering or in danger, he talks about it to his manager who takes the necessary precautions and takes the best possible care to ensure that the source of this information cannot be identified. We have only rarely been faced with this sort of problem. In this environment which is sometimes difficult, our success rate for people opening their doors to us is unheard of, and vastly greater than that obtained by any other door-to-door interviewer.

**Q.:** *What relationship do you have with the authorities?*

**A. C.:** We only intervene in a neighbourhood if the mayor is convinced that our action is well-founded, and if he is certain that the inhabitants will want to work with us and are enthusiastic. We need him to open certain doors for us. On the other hand, we do not ask him for any financial compensation because we want to remain independent.

**Q.:** *Associations are not always amenable to co-operative efforts. Is this a problem for you?*

**A. C.:** We are going to focus on this over the next three years. We must establish the satisfactory means of co-operation with the neighbourhood development committees, social centres, tenants' associations, and so on. For this reason, we contact those in charge of the associations in the area to make ourselves known to them, and explain our work which is exclusively door-to-door and is not in competition with them. Successful communication largely depends on the people we meet, but today we are making progress in the field, and the people we meet are receptive. Some neighbourhood development committees have even asked us to sit on their boards of directors, and in Lille when we carried out surveys for a landlord, we expressed our satisfaction with these committees. We are also in discussion with those in charge of national networks who are often looking for new ideas.

## No power struggles

**Q.:** *Do you not risk becoming institutionalised yourself?*

**A. C.:** Some people in the teams want to increase their knowledge about people's rights, health, and any other subject. This would help us with our fundraising with regard to specialised organisations. However, I think that we should never be experts in these fields. It is precisely because we are not experts that we are readily accessible to the people whom we meet. Our sole expertise is in the relationships we create and our closeness.

Fundamentally, it is the people who are the most important factor, not the methods. We think that this ideology is essential in order to create a true management culture. Why are the *Voisins Malins* successful? Because there is no power struggle! When they knock on a door, their sole objective is to be useful in this specific professional context. This is also the reason why we are a national association, and that we do not want to create local associations. We just try to introduce ourselves into various areas and play a part there.

*Q.: How do you see the future? Will there be branches of VoisinMalin everywhere?*

**A. C.:** Absolutely not! We are a very horizontal organisation. Today I am the only person hierarchically responsible for the twenty permanent staff. But this will not be possible for very much longer. Thanks to AG2R, CO Management Consultancy helped us to identify our optimal managerial organisation. They suggested we create territorial management positions. Out of our thirteen managers, ten arrived in the past two years and I am no longer able to train them to cope with what is currently happening in the various neighbourhoods, and to help them to understand the characteristics of a specific area or teach them how to achieve legitimacy. The first manager started in Courcouronnes seven years ago and created the activity. He is still working there, and will be our first ‘territorial manager’ embodying the original spirit behind VoisinMalin. As a result, I can now see the future structure and succession which will enable managers who have already been with us a long time to evolve and to find a suitable role for themselves.

■ Presentation of the speaker ■

**Anne Charpy:** Having worked for twenty years in poor neighbourhoods, she founded VoisinMalin to recreate the link between inhabitants and their environment (social life and services) by building on the hidden talents of their neighbours. She graduated from ESCP Business School and has a Masters in urbanism from Sciences Po.



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