

# The next big challenge for social entrepreneurship

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Social entrepreneurship has become a buzzword today. But two broad trends may be changing the way we understand the concept. One is its Western orientation, and the other is corporatization.

If you search “social entrepreneurship” on Google, most of the definitions and examples you will get will be from the Western world. Wikipedia quotes Bill Drayton, founder of “Ashoka: Innovators for the Public” as the “person responsible for the rise of the phrase ‘social entrepreneur’, a concept first found in print in 1972”.

While giving the history of social entrepreneurship, Wiki only cites Western documentation. Vinoba Bhave is the only example mentioned from India, despite the country’s rich contribution to social entrepreneurship.

Other developing and poor countries don’t fare much better. More significantly, if you want to study social entrepreneurship, you have to visit institutes in the US and the UK.

On a recent trip to the US, my group was addressed by the director of the social entrepreneurship centre of a well-known university. She introduced herself by talking about how many times she has been on television, before proceeding to talk about how she is part of an escalating business on the stock market and how her centre is the best for social entrepreneurship studies as it has several well-known social enterprises as partners. She ended her talk by saying, “I will be happy to hear from you on email and although I get 200 mails a day, I will try to reply your mails.”

Is she the right person to teach social entrepreneurship? I leave the answer to you. But a related development is that an increasing number of research and educational institutes and social venture capitalists are insisting that social enterprises should be structured as corporate ones and they must find the means to be sustainable on their own. In other words, they must make profits to manage expenses and provide good returns on investment to social venture capitalists.

My observation is that social entrepreneurship is fast becoming a field to spread business practices of profitability in the name of sustainability.

For me, the biggest social entrepreneur is Mahatma Gandhi, and in more recent times, Anna Hazare, Muhammad Yunus, Bunker Roy, Aruna Roy, Ela Bhatt, and many others like them whom you can find in the book *How to Change the World* by David Bornstein. He recently started a website dedicated to covering news and stories of innovations, ideas and solutions that are changing the landscape by providing solutions to social problems.

How do you define social entrepreneurship? Drayton says, “social entrepreneurs are individuals with innovative solutions to the society’s most pressing social problems”.

“Social entrepreneurs,” he adds, “are not content just to give a fish or teach how to fish. They will not rest until they have revolutionised the fishing industry.”

I could not agree more. I have identified information as the biggest reason for the divide between haves and have-nots. And I have decided that, as a means of addressing this divide, I will not be satisfied until each and every *panchayat*, legislative and parliamentary constituency, non-governmental organization and school in our country has its website.

The challenge for social enterprises will be to find the balance between profitability and social impact; I hope that the efforts to make such enterprises financially sustainable will not inhibit their goal of finding solutions to social problems.

The question that remains is how to make social movements such as the Egyptian revolution this year and the Anna Hazare movement against corruption in India financially sustainable. Is there any social venture capitalist who can invest in such social movements and expect to receive tangible financial gains?

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