

Write-Up on the NUS Social Entrepreneurship Forum & Exhibition 2004

"True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."

Martin Luther King Jr.



The word "entrepreneur" comes from the French, and means "one who takes to hand". This has been used by the French economist Jean-Baptiste Say to characterize a special economic character: one who does not simply open a business but rather someone who "shifts economic resources out of an area of lower and into an area of higher productivity and greater yield." Yet more recently, we have, in facing global challenges and spurring local economic growth, created a buzzword of the term "entrepreneurship" to mean a chasing of innovative means in undertaking a commercial venture.

So what does Social Entrepreneurship mean, and what does it entail?

The Ministry of Community Development and Sports (MCDS) summarises social entrepreneurship as "the initiative of an individual, community, business, or collaboration of partners to address social needs in diverse areas with innovative solutions grounded in business principles".

While Milton Friedman would suggest that business should solely stay as that – a profit-making entity (the firm's only responsibility is to make profits), social entrepreneurs propose that immense social change comes with cause-centred business: it aims to provide a social solution while conquering the need for donations or government initiatives to be sustainable.

As Ms Sinee Chakthranont, an Ashoka representative in Thailand, shared with us at the forum:

"...while some say you don't just give a man a fish - you teach him how to fish, a social entrepreneur does not just teach a man to fish, he will not rest until he revolutionizes the entire fishing industry..."

What began as an idea to ignite curiosity for Social Entrepreneurship within the Business School at the National University of Singapore, saw a group of NUS Business School students spearheading the project and bringing it to a national level with support from the Business School and her alumni, good-will sponsors, and guidance from the Ministry of Community and Sports (MCDS).

And it certainly succeeded in igniting more than just curiosity.

“...I would rather have people that are illiterate than people who are uneducated... The Barefoot College is a place of learning and unlearning. It's a place where the teacher is the learner and the learner is the teacher. It's a place where no degrees and certificates are given because in development there are no experts – only resource persons. It's a place ... where all are treated as equals, and there is no hierarchy...”



Such is the frankness of **Sanjit Bunker Roy** - founder and director of the Barefoot College in India. Bunker inspired the crowd with his fatherly demeanor. Each word he spoke resonated soul-to-soul and lashed at, almost chidingly at our own state of inadequateness in our paper chase for “literacy”.

Since it was founded in 1972, Barefoot College has sought to protect the well-being of the rural poor in India. Training is provided to the “illiterate” - they learn how to become solar engineers equipped with the know-how that provides them with essential amenities like clean water and electricity. Yet all this was not achieved

without resistance from deep-rooted social stratification and political stonewalls.

Bunker had a privileged childhood. He graduated from the prestigious St. Stephen's College, but through a famine 30 years ago, he started his work with the rural villagers. This youthful vigour continues to drive Bunker today in his work; his energy gets recharged whenever he goes into the rural villages. Today, twenty Barefoot College field centres can be found in 13 of India's 26 states, and the numbers are still on the increase

Next to speak was **Jim Pitofsky**, deputy director of the National Youth Leadership Council. His experience in dealing with government agencies, businesses and youths, saw him sharing tips of how to make real the dream job of being a social entrepreneur. To be like a visionary, means having to venture into the un-trudged, and being revolutionary, means having no road map but your moral compass and passion to stir you. When a reporter from the floor questioned whether the social entrepreneur fell under the profit or non-profit category, Jim replied, “We always get fixated with labels: ‘profit’ or ‘non-profit’, but let the social impact be the means of judging success. How much good have we achieved? Can we achieve more...”



The 3rd and final segment of the forum was a plenary session with **Dr Mary Ann Tsao** of Vice-President of East West Cultural Development Centre, Mr Don Wong, founder of HighPoint Halfway House, Mr Matthew Yap, Founder of National Mentoring Network & BP International Mentoring Foundation, and **Miss Sinee Chakthranont** Country Representative of Ashoka. This session was hosted by Professor **Wong Poh Kam**.



to prison for taking drugs at a young age. After Christianity, and started HighPoint to help ex-drug addicts and ex-prison inmates, and he also started the HighPoint Movers to provide jobs for them. However, Don realised that a strong business arm would provide far more job opportunities and the profits could sustain the social aim of HighPoint. Therefore he revamped the image of the workers to be more professional and set up its restaurant and car polishing businesses with the help of MCDS's Social Enterprise Fund.

Other than High Point, eleven other examples of local social enterprises were showcased at an exhibition that took place concurrently. These had likewise received funding from MCDS's Social Enterprise Fund, and had different models of business ranging from *kaya* toast to car washing.



This ending of the forum may mark the end of a year long preparation on the part of the Social Entrepreneurship team – 30 youths that toiled for a cause they believed in, and reaped the benefits of experiencing at first-hand the power of social change, and the passion of our 1200 audience that spent their early Sunday morning with us. Dr Mary Ann Tsao calls it “an outrage” that stems from being unsatisfied with the present mechanisms that “spurs one to ask for change”, and indeed we felt the need for one, and were inspired by the prospect of one.

A feedback conducted at the end of the forum saw most of the audience benefiting from the forum. The issues discussed were pertinent to them and it triggered within many an innate desire to venture. An online forum has been constructed for those who would like to pursue social entrepreneurship, as well as to network.

There is really no tested-and-proven path in this journey of social innovation, only the platform for further probing and learning from each other, which the forum strives to provide. For the warily pragmatic, social entrepreneurship offers a means

to bridge ideals of a better world with economic sustainability. In reality, Social Entrepreneurship brings back “business” to the role it played from the start, and ought to play today – that of building community.

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On behalf of the Social Entrepreneurship Forum & Exhibition 2004 Committee