

Creating large-scale change: Not 'can' but 'how'

By Professor J. Gregory Dees

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Skeptics of social entrepreneurship often comment, “Sure, social entrepreneurs are doing good things, but can they ever scale their impact sufficiently to put a dent in the enormous and persistent problems we face?” Scaling impact is a very serious and challenging issue, but we need a better way of framing the conversation. Thus I would like to challenge the value of starting with the question: “Can social entrepreneurs create large-scale change?”

We know that they can achieve significant and widespread impact. Consider, for instance Fazel Abed at BRAC, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee. BRAC was started in 1972, in the wake of Bangladesh’s independence. BRAC now runs more than 37,000 schools, provides microfinance products to some 8 million people, engages 80,000 health volunteers, employs 120,000 workers, serves over 100 million people, generates 80 percent of its own funding through social enterprises, is operating in eight countries outside of Bangladesh, and is generally regarded as being effective in its various health, education, social, and economic development projects. BRAC has fundamentally changed the landscape of Bangladesh, as anyone who travels through the country can attest, and increased the opportunities for the poor of that country to move out of poverty. It is now engaged in bringing its approach to several other countries. Even if we grant this as an example of a social entrepreneur achieving “large-scale change,” we have to admit that BRAC is the exception, not the rule. It is hard for social entrepreneurs to scale their impact at this level, and when they do, it often takes a very long time. This is particularly troublesome when we face social and environmental problems that are both pressing and painful.

What would be a more constructive way to frame this issue? I propose three reframing steps.

Reframing step # 1: Shift from “can” to “how can”

Several years ago, I had a conversation with psychologist Ellen Langer at Harvard in which she described an experiment involving schoolchildren. In one classroom, she showed a picture of a person in a wheelchair and asked, “Can this person drive a car?” The students uniformly answered no, and they had no trouble coming up with reasons why. This was not a very constructive conversation. In another classroom, she showed the same picture and asked a slightly different question, “How can this person drive a car?” After some silence, the students started to offer ideas. A whole different kind of conversation ensued, creative, energized, and constructive.

That’s the kind of conversation we need to be having about social entrepreneurs scaling impact—not framing this as a yes or no proposition—can they versus can’t they, but as a challenge to which we all need to rise. In reframing this as a “how can” question, I think we can be a bit more precise. With social entrepreneurs attacking time-sensitive social

Given that many of them rely to some degree on relatively scarce resources, such as philanthropic dollars, it is important that they scale impact with an eye to the efficient use of those resources. Thus, we would be better served by focusing our intelligence and creativity on the question, “How can more social entrepreneurs achieve greater, that is, more widespread and lasting, impact sooner and more cost effectively?”

Reframing step #2: Explore all methods for scaling impact

In thinking about the best ways to achieve large-scale change, we need to keep in mind that there are many different paths, and some of the most effective paths do not require growing an organization to large scale.

BRAC did scale its impact by growing to provide more and better services to more and more people, but this is only one path. Other social entrepreneurs have scaled their impact in different ways. For instance, Dr. Cecily

Saunders, who founded St. Christopher's Hospice in London and brought the hospice idea to the United States through speeches and teaching at the Yale School of Nursing in the 1960s, helped spawn a movement that changed attitudes about how we should care for people at the end of life. This movement led, for instance, to policy changes in US government, including Medicare reimbursement for hospice care, and ultimately to the growth of a vibrant hospice sector in the United States, the United Kingdom, and many other countries. Some 35 countries now have integrated palliative care or hospice care into their health systems and another 80 or so have localized provision. Saunders drove large-scale change through her innovations in care and her promotion of the hospice concept, but not by growing St. Christopher's. The hospice movement's success involved replicating what works, creating a cultural change, and changing public policy in many countries.

Sometimes impact can be achieved even without replicating service provision. Dr. Garth Japhet, founder of Soul City Institute, a South African group that aims to improve health through mass media, achieves his impact through radio and television shows that bring health and social issues to light, creating awareness and stimulating public debate. The shows entertain, motivate, and educate. Not only does the Soul City series reach large audiences (35 million people in eight southern African countries) but it has been credited with spurring legislation on domestic abuse and changing social norms. This is similar to the highly successful designated-driver campaign launched in the United States to encourage groups who wanted to go out drinking alcoholic beverages to designate one member not to drink so he or she could drive everyone home safely. Deaths from drunk driving have declined significantly in the United States since the start of this campaign. It was orchestrated by Jay Winsten from Harvard's Center of Health Communications and one of the keys to its success was getting television producers to include the concept in popular television shows. He built support from a coalition of organizations, including the influential Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD).

Social entrepreneurs can also scale their impact by testing and proving markets in arenas where businesses are skeptical. Muhammad Yunus of Grameen Bank partnered with Iqbal Quadir, and others to create Grameen Phone. This business got started in part with the help of Grameen's village "telephone ladies," micro-entrepreneurs who borrowed from Grameen Bank to buy phones and resell the time to other villagers. Experiments such as this by a social entrepreneur helped prove and build the market markets are now thriving with many large corporations providing the services. The village phone ladies are no longer needed in many areas. Cell phone technology is in turn becoming a platform for new social and commercial ventures involving such things as banking over the phone or using phones instead of computers to communicate important information (for example, market prices for farm products).

If we care about large-scale change, we need to keep in mind that social entrepreneurs can scale their impact by getting new legislation or regulations passed; getting old legislation or regulations enforced; shifting social norms, behaviors and attitudes among fellow citizens, corporations, government personnel; changing the way markets operate; and finding ways to prevent the problems they have been solving or reducing the needs they have been serving. None of these methods of scaling impact necessarily requires massive organizational growth, which can slow the process down. The impact happens because of the activities of others. Thus, when we ask about scaling impact, we should also ask: "How can social entrepreneurs magnify and accelerate the scale of their impact by looking beyond simply growing their organizations or replicating their service models?"

Reframing step #3: Accept scale as a shared responsibility

We need to recognize that the challenge of social entrepreneurs achieving widespread and lasting impact is not just their challenge, it belongs to all of us and the solution requires action on many fronts by many players.

It takes an ecosystem to solve a social problem. Social and environmental problems are typically rooted in behaviors, norms, institutions, social structures, and policies that no one social entrepreneur and no one social venture can hope to change working alone. Social entrepreneurs may have important roles to play in their ecosystems, as innovators, catalysts, leaders, coalition builders, visionaries, and the like. But they should not bear the sole responsibility for the success or failure of their innovations to create large-scale change. It is as much a failure of the society in which that social entrepreneur is working, as it is a failure of the social entrepreneur. If our societies fail to capitalize on or harvest the value of the innovations and the knowledge developed by social entrepreneurs, it reveals weaknesses in our institutions and policies. If Dorothy Stoneman has developed a powerful program to deliver education and job skills to US high-school dropouts through YouthBuild and this innovation fails to reach every young person in the United States who wants to take advantage of it, that is not just Dorothy's problem, it is a problem for all of us in the United States. Why don't

we have a society in which effective social innovations scale to reach those who could benefit from them? The failure is our failure, the loss our loss.

While many countries have worked hard to create a climate that is friendly to business entrepreneurship, few, if any have thought about supporting social entrepreneurship in any systematic way. If we look at societies in which business entrepreneurship thrives, it is largely because of supportive infrastructures (such as targeted financial services, consulting assistance, and education), along with cultural encouragement, and accommodating legal and regulatory mechanisms. The infrastructures that provide financial support, talent, and advisory services for business entrepreneurs and for more traditional nonprofits are simply not geared toward the distinctive needs of social entrepreneurs. The capital markets and financial instruments for social entrepreneurs are not well developed, neither are performance measures. Educational institutions in are still very thin. Often the legal and tax structures are also at odds with some of the hybrid structures that social entrepreneurs often use. Even BRAC had to go to the Supreme Court in Bangladesh to defend itself with regard to tax matters. And in many cultures social entrepreneurs are lumped in with “charities.” This is unlikely to result in the kind of support for serious problem solving and capacity building that social entrepreneurs need in order to scale their impact. We are lucky that social entrepreneurs have had as much impact as they have, considering that they do not get institutional and social support that is tailored to their needs or designed specifically to help them achieve their potential.

As we look for constructive solutions to the challenge of creating large-scale change, we need to keep in mind the importance of the infrastructure, culture, and policy environment in which social entrepreneurs operate. The success of social entrepreneurs is a matter of great interest to all of us. Many of us shape the conditions that determine how easy or difficult it is for them to succeed. It is unwise for us to put the burden for achieving success on their shoulders alone. Thus, when we ask how social entrepreneurs can better scale their impact, we should also ask: “How can others, such as governments, multi-lateral aid agencies, philanthropic organizations, social investors, financial service organizations, universities, consultants, corporations, bankers, and the media, to mention just some of the key players, create conditions that help social entrepreneurs scale their impact in more timely, significant, cost-effective ways?” Put more broadly: “How can we create an ecosystem that optimizes the benefits of social entrepreneurship to society?” And more specifically, “How can I help bring about this change?”

Reframed in this way, I think we can have a more constructive and valuable conversation about scaling the impact of social entrepreneurs.