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Themes

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## Voices | Social entrepreneurs

### Tipping the world: The power of collaborative entrepreneurship



#### Bill Drayton

Ashoka: Innovators for the Public

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To question whether social entrepreneurs can achieve large-scale change is to doubt the existence of Florence Nightingale, Maria Montessori, William Wilberforce, Fazle Abed, Jimmy Wales, or the 2,700 Ashoka Fellows!

After all, what defines the true social entrepreneur is that he or she simply cannot come to rest in life until his or her vision has *become* the new pattern societywide. Scholars and artists are satisfied when they express an idea. Professionals are when they serve a client well, and managers are when their organization succeeds. None of this much interests the entrepreneur. The life purpose of the true social entrepreneur is to change the world.

Ashoka creates detailed life histories of every serious candidate it considers for election into its world community of leading social entrepreneurs. We have learned to look for this central, gyroscope-like quality because it is so predictive of who will ultimately meet our standard for election, which is to create at least continental-scale pattern change in an important field such as the environment or human rights. This gyroscope kicks in as far back as childhood and continues to define the social entrepreneur's life decade after decade.

Once one understands this life-defining drive, a good many other characteristics of the true entrepreneur become obvious. They focus everyday on the "how to" questions. How are they going to get from here to their ultimate goal? How are they going to deal with this opportunity or that barrier? How are the pieces going to fit together? They are engineers, not poets.

For the same reason, they are attentive listeners and they are highly realistic. If something is not working, they want to know right away—and they will then proceed to change either the environment and/or their idea.

The entrepreneur's job is not to take an idea and then implement it. That is what franchisees do. The

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ur is building something that is entirely new—by constantly creating and testing and recreating and  
; and recreating again.

cial entrepreneur also has an almost magical ability to move people, a power rooted in exceptional  
r. He or she is always asking people to do things that are unreasonable—and people do them. The  
starts with the other person knowing that he or she can trust the entrepreneur and then realizing that  
eneur and the idea are utterly fused—which is to say that they can trust the idea as well.

**4** entrepreneur has an inner confidence that most sense but do not understand. While others think  
urs are taking risks, entrepreneurs don't see it that way because they have thought things through  
extremely well. They also believe in their ability continuously to adapt the idea as they drive toward a goal that  
they know is a huge win for everyone, and ultimately to reach that goal. They know, in other words, that they  
have the gift that brings the greatest happiness in the world, the gift of being able to give at the highest level.

Once one grasps who the true social entrepreneur is, one would have to be crazed to bet against him or her  
ultimately changing the world at large scale.<sup>1</sup>

Ashoka evaluates the impact of its Fellows five years after their election and start up. Several months ago, the  
Corporate Executive Board Company reported the results of a survey of Ashoka's impact, which they conducted  
in 12 languages across the globe last year. The results were completely consistent with the results over the prior  
eight years.

Fifty-two percent of the Ashoka Fellows had changed national policy within five years of election. (The range over  
earlier years was 49 to 60 percent.)

Seventy-six percent had changed the pattern in their field nationally (on average 3.2 times) within the same five  
years.

These results are especially striking since five years is early in the lifecycle of the social entrepreneur.

However, these results only begin to tell the story of the social entrepreneur's impact.

Every social entrepreneur has a second dimension of impact that, especially at this moment in history, may well  
be more important than the impact he or she is having in pursuing his or her immediate social change objective.

Every social entrepreneur is a mass recruiter of local changemakers. Here is one of the few significant structural  
differences between the social and the business entrepreneur. The social entrepreneur has no interest in  
capturing a market and digging a moat. Instead, the goal is, indeed, to change the world.

The way social entrepreneurs do this almost always is to make their idea as understandable, attractive, safe, and  
as supported as necessary precisely so that local people in community after community after community will  
recognize that the idea would be hugely valuable to their community and also judge that they could make that  
idea fly. The moment one or several local people make that decision, stand up, and champion the idea, they have  
become local changemakers. They will disrupt local patterns; they will recruit others to be changemakers; and a  
few will later become large-scale social entrepreneurs in their own right.



lication of such local changemakers is critical for several reasons. They will provide a large part of the grassroots leadership for their newly adopted field. These engaged citizens are also key to deepening because, as they master the issues and become a driving force within institutions, they and their will no longer be able to be ignored.

4 tant, this multiplication of local changemakers is a central contribution to the most important transformation in the structure of society since the Agricultural Revolution. For millennia the social as been one where a very few people “managed” everyone else. This is a model that worked in a static n those being managed essentially had repetitive tasks to do. However, we now live in a time where l complexity of change are both escalating exponentially. This new environment requires a shift in the organization of both institutions and societies to one of flexible teams of teams that come together around whatever change opportunities exist and then reform around the next. In this world, everyone must be a changemaker. That is because you do not have a team unless everyone is a player—and, in a world defined by change, to play one must be ready to contribute to changemaking.

Social entrepreneurs are even more powerful when they collaborate with one another and/or with their business peers. Ashoka has always known that its ability to contribute comes largely through the mutual help and collaborations our community makes possible. A few examples will give you a feel:

Even a few social entrepreneurs working together can be hugely effective. One Ashoka Fellow—Silvia Maria Carvalho, based in São Paulo—whose program transforms the perception of preschool from that of stigmatized warehousing to an important step in education, was able to turn trade union prejudice into support by working with an Ashoka colleague who employed large numbers of women to provide hot lunches in area factories by providing model facilities on site for their young children. An Indonesian Fellow named Iwan Nusyirwan spread a technique for growing mushrooms on wood chips floating in rice paddies, thus generating a new crop without requiring land, by sharing it with other Fellows looking for new job- and income-creating opportunities.

Larger collaborations are even more valuable — be it Asian Fellows collaborating across the region to fight the cross-national trade in women and children or twelve Fellows working together to change prison policies across Latin America.

Functional collaborations add further leverage. As security conditions have worsened, especially in Latin America and Asia, Ashoka’s mutual help Fellow security program has become more important, for example in connecting the dots to see danger on the horizon in Pakistan’s tribal areas. Similarly, at least in Asia, the Fellows have learned how to help one another when disaster strikes locally. And more broadly, because the child of a social entrepreneur has a parent who is possessed by an idea and who may work in difficult areas, finding an engaged and supportive peer group can be hugely important for this Young Ashokan (and his or her parents), in order to help him or her gain a deeper understanding of the entrepreneurial parent and his or her work.

Community multiplies strength and impact.

Thus far we have seen that individual social entrepreneurs and, even more, groups of them that come together for mutual help and collaboration, produce extraordinary results.

Over the last half-dozen years we have been developing something with even more far-reaching impact



*tive entrepreneurship*. There has never been anything like it before.

Always seeking out and helping to launch the best new ideas in the hands of the strongest entrepreneurs on every continent—without in any way predefining the idea fields. (If it sought to focus only on the thought most important, it would always miss the newly ripe areas that the next wave of entrepreneurs are just beginning to develop.)

**4** Once there are several hundred leading social entrepreneurs in a field across the continents, one can bet that a jump to the next paradigm in the field is near. Given how centrally important it is to each of the entrepreneurs to be able successfully to change the world, they make these life bets of where to commit very, very carefully.

The challenge, of course, is to detect what the next paradigm or “S-curve” is going to be. The Ashoka community has, over the last dozen years, learned how to study the questions these pioneer entrepreneurs ask and also the patterns among their answers in order to answer that critical question.

Once it is thus clear where the world must go, the community then determines what one or two things must happen if the world is to get there—and somewhere between a third and a half of the leading social entrepreneur Fellows then work together to tip the seven to ten countries that are critical ultimately to tipping the world.

For example, the 500 Ashoka Fellows whose primary focus is serving children and young people have figured out that the old paradigm that defines successful growing up as learning the world’s existing knowledge and rules, while successful in a static world, is thoroughly inadequate in a world of escalating change. In this new world, all children and young people must first master a set of social skills that will enable them to be active contributors to change—empathy/teamwork/leadership/changemaking. The global team of leading social entrepreneurs must, therefore, ensure: (1) that every young child masters and practices empathy (see *Ensuring Children Succeed in the Coming Everyone A Changemaker World [PDF]*), and (2) that all young people have the experience of seeing an opportunity to improve their schools or communities, building teams to do so, and later realizing that they have changed their world ([see youthventure.org](http://see youthventure.org)).

What distinguishes entrepreneurs from everyone else is that their job is to change the overall patterns and systems of society. Can there be anything more impactful than a global team of the world’s best entrepreneurs who develop a strategy to tip the world toward a better future?

<sup>1</sup>Any doubts about the impact of social entrepreneurs are partly the result of two misperceptions. First, whereas 30 years ago no one knew what the phrase “social entrepreneur” meant, now there are a vast number of people who call themselves social entrepreneurs who are really wonderfully good-hearted managers or professionals or, indeed, poets. They have little in common with true social entrepreneurs. Second is the notion held by many scholars, foundation executives, and others that social entrepreneurs should behave like and be measured by the same yardsticks as business. Social entrepreneurs are trying to change the world, not capture a market, therefore the standard measures of organizational size and growth are inappropriate.

