Social Entrepreneurs and Education

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When I was first approached about an issue of CICE devoted to the topic of social entrepreneurs and education, I was encouraged by the interest in a topic that has been the focus of my work for the past decade, but curious about the kinds of papers that might be submitted. Social entrepreneurship is still very new to the academic world, especially outside of business and public policy schools. Academic attention to this "field" is only about a decade old. Most courses and research efforts were started in the past five years, with the vast majority occurring in business schools. Only recently has this topic been attracting the attention of scholars in disciplines such as education, public health, and social work.

Outside of business schools, initial reactions are often mixed and occasionally negative. People dedicated to social issues can be put off by the connotations of the term "entrepreneur," especially because of its association with business. Business is often seen as part of the problem, not the solution. It is not unusual for the concept of "social entrepreneurship" to raise the specter of market hegemony. The concept may also bring to mind the worst aspects of business, forms of abuse and exploitation that can accompany the pursuit of profits.

Since my work was cited in the Call for Papers for this issue, I have been given the honor of making some closing comments. Overall, I want to congratulate the authors and the editors for balancing constructive, inquisitive, and critical perspectives. The work presented here should advance our thinking about social entrepreneurship in general, not just in the world of education. The four papers that made it into this issue are encouraging and thought provoking. They suggest that there is a positive role for social entrepreneurship in education, but they also raise a number of important issues and tensions that need to be addressed, as this construct gets further refined, developed, and extended into new domains.

The case studies from Bangladesh and Thailand illustrate the potential power of social entrepreneurs to identify opportunities to make a difference and to use their social resources to pursue these opportunities effectively, often under adverse conditions. Sperandio's analysis of four examples illustrates the wide variations that exist among social entrepreneurs even in a single country working on similar problems. These cases differ in their strategies for achieving impact and their strategies for attracting resources to support their work. They will also differ in the magnitude and sustainability of their impact.

Su and Muenning construct a richly detailed study of social entrepreneurs addressing the educational needs of Shan Burmese refugees in Thailand. This depiction offers deep

insights into entrepreneurial resourcefulness and adaptability. One of the remarkable skills of entrepreneurs in any sector is their ability to draw on social connections and other intangible assets to mobilize the tangible resources (money, people, facilities, etc.) that they need to carry out their work. They persuade others to contribute resources and are creative in getting the most out of the resources they mobilize. Entrepreneurs also constantly innovate and adapt to changing circumstances and needs. Yai and Noi, the two social entrepreneurs in this case, provide powerful illustrations of these entrepreneurial virtues.

Both of these case-based papers also raise intriguing questions for further research. One question concerns the tension between crafting specific localized solutions and generating scalable ideas that have the potential to address social needs on a widespread basis. Needs are often much greater than any one local effort can address, but it can be difficult to achieve scale with solutions that are tailored to local conditions. This question of scale is particularly challenging for social entrepreneurs. Another question concerns the sustainability of new, resource-constrained initiatives, especially those that challenge the status quo. Keeping promising social ventures alive long enough to create sustainable impact is no easy task. It is a matter of finding the right operating model and resource strategy. Sustainability and scalability are two cardinal issues on which we need more rigorous research.

While the two remaining papers approach the topic from a more critical perspective, both are highly instructive and should help move the discussion of social entrepreneurship forward. By juxtaposing social entrepreneurship with social justice activism in the context of Malawi, Sharra reminds us that social entrepreneurship alone is not a substitute for activism. Fortunately, many social entrepreneurs are recognizing that effecting social change requires advocacy and in some cases the creation of a social movement, not just launching a social venture. These approaches are not substitutes, but can be complementary to one another. Sharra also raises questions about the fragmentation and decentralization that can come from various individuals and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) pursuing their own entrepreneurial solutions with little coordination. One of the virtues of social entrepreneurship is that it permits different experiments to be conducted in the search for better ways of serving social needs, such as education. The challenge is how to spread effective ideas and practices when they are discovered. If social entrepreneurship is about achieving impact, as I have argued elsewhere, then many social entrepreneurs will have to find ways to join with others to share useful knowledge and act in common cause to trigger broader social change. We do not have to choose between social entrepreneurship and social activism; we should encourage and equip citizens to do both. Both of these paths are best served when grounded in live experience, as Sharra recommends. Though he does not study social entrepreneurs, I am certain he would find that many of them pursue visions grounded in lived experience.

Both Sharra's article and the intriguing essay by Humphries and Grant express reservations about the term "entrepreneur" because of its link to a corporate, business, and market ethos. Together they raise the issue of how we can embrace "social entrepreneurship" without turning all human relations into crass market transactions. In

the end, Humphries and Grant strike a hopeful note, but I want to address this concern further.

As noted by these authors, I have been quite explicit in my rejection of the definition of social entrepreneurs that focuses only on the use of commercial methods. While some social entrepreneurs will find a commercial approach well suited to their purposes, others will not. Markets have their limits and, as we have seen in the case studies offered in the two other papers, there are many ways for social entrepreneurs to structure their organizations and relationships in order to achieve their intended social impact. However, I am certainly more comfortable with the connotations of the term "entrepreneur" than these authors.

The term "social entrepreneur" is not meant to convey the mindset common to large business corporations. Entrepreneurs, even in business, are the subversives. By "reforming or revolutionizing the pattern of production," as economist Joseph Schumpeter put it, they are the agents of "creative destruction"--out with the old and in with the new. Howard Stevenson, a professor of entrepreneurship at Harvard, explicitly contrasts them with "administrators" who preserve the status quo. Entrepreneurs may be part of what Habermas calls "the system," as Humphries and Grant suggest, but they are not corporate or bureaucratic. They promote change within the system, and some of them actively work to change the system. Yes, most business entrepreneurs are concerned about profit. Without it they cannot survive. But for many entrepreneurs this is not the primary motivation. By marrying the concept of entrepreneurship with the word "social," I hope to describe someone who focuses on social change instead of profit as the goal, and approaches this goal with an entrepreneurial spirit, one of determination, innovation, and resourcefulness.

Also, I do not see markets as negatively as these authors appear to see them. To me markets are mechanisms that are suitable in certain circumstances and not suitable in others. It is too easy to lay the world problems at the feet of the abstraction called "the market." Any student of history knows that non-market institutions have been just as harmful. Governments, including both political leaders and the military, have been responsible for their share of horrors and injustices. The problems facing the Burmese Shan in Thailand are not the result of market, but of the Burmese government and longstanding ethnic animosities. History is littered with many more examples, including many involving governments hostile to markets. Consider Thailand's other neighbor, Cambodia, for a rather dramatic example during the reign of the Khmer Rouge. Religion, despite its moral impulses, has also served as an institutional setting and justification for terror, injustice, prejudice, and abuse. Think of caste systems, inquisitions, crusades, widespread oppression of religious minorities, and terrorist activities justified on religious grounds. Ethnic, tribal, and family conflicts have also contributed to grave injustices and deep prejudices. Many so-called market atrocities are simply the acting out of these non-market conflicts in the setting of the market.

Markets have their flaws, but when conditions are right, they have produced enormous benefits. When customers and workers have the freedom to choose among competing firms and can do so armed with the information to make sound decisions, markets work reasonably well. They feed, clothe, and shelter millions without resorting to government

coercion or treating people as the object of someone's charity. The profits generated in markets provide the financial resources for government programs and for charity. Unless goods and services are sold for more than they cost to produce, namely at a profit, there is no economic surplus with which to pay for shared public goods, to supplement the incomes of those who cannot work, or to create reserves for bad times. Markets can even provide financial incentives to get past prejudices when these get in the way of good business. These incentives are not always strong enough to overcome ethnic and religious biases, but they move actors in the right direction. They also engage people in crafting their own lives by offering choices. We can debate whether they offer too much choice, but some level of choice is a generally good thing. Finally, there is a kind of decency, autonomy, and respect in market transactions, when markets are working well, that is very attractive to most of us. Customers have a standing to complain or take their business elsewhere. Recipients of charity are expected to accept the gift with gratitude. We say, "Do not look a gift horse in the mouth." Much as we may admire charity, it is a power relationship, one that can be demeaning to the recipient.

My point is not to defend markets as the right organizing principle for all human affairs. They are not that. Profit-seeking behavior in markets has motivated egregious behavior. My point is simply that the situation is not simply black and white, with markets being bad and other social institutions being good. Markets have virtues that can be channeled into social good. At the same time, the social relationships in Habermas's "lifeworld," as Grant and Humphries refer to it, are not always healthy or conducive to human flourishing. Consider the abuse and conflict even within families. I fear that blaming an abstract version of "the market" or "the system" allows us to avoid addressing deeper problems in human relations.

When it comes to improving society, I am a pragmatist who believes in experimentation and innovation as important methods for finding better ways to promote human flourishing. More than ever, I am convinced that we need to break down the walls between our economic and social lives, not to advance the hegemony of "the market" but to integrate our lives and better serve our personal and shared purposes. Markets should be one tool in our toolkit for creating the kinds of communities and societies in which we want to live. This tool can be modified and refined to better serve our social needs. Social entrepreneurs should be creative and critical in their use of markets and the design of their ventures.

Though we start with different views of the world and travel different paths to get there, I have come around to a view that is consonant with the final vision sketched by Humphries and Grant when they speak of investing "all human activities, including our economic activities, with respect for human dignity and responsibility for the earth that sustains us" (p. 46). I share their hope that breaking down the boundaries between different spheres of life will result in more effective social institutions as well as more socially beneficial forms of economic exchange. Though I think social entrepreneurship is currently relatively rare, I happily embrace their suggestion that the values and characteristics inherent in social entrepreneurship should serve as aspirations for all human beings.

Let me close by saying that I am heartened by thoughtful critical attention that the authors in this issue of CICE have given to the construct of "social entrepreneurship." A decade ago, there were only a handful of people using this terminology. With a lively intellectual debate and a robust research agenda, I am optimistic about the prospects for this field of inquiry going forward. I believe that the social entrepreneurship construct has great potential for helping us mobilize resources for the social good and for stimulating new thinking about economic and social institutions. I hope that this issue of CICE is just the beginning of a longer constructive and critical conversation.

References

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