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Social innovation in development: A call to break down silos

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SOCIAL INNOVATION IN DEVELOPMENT

A CALL TO BREAK DOWN SILOS

What distinguishes "social innovation" from other efforts to address social problems? And why should the answer matter to anyone genuinely interested in social change? **John Donaldson**, **Victoria Gerrard** and **Sanushka Mudaliar** offer an in-depth discussion of the possibilities and pitfalls of pursuing social innovation in the context of international development.

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Victoria Gerrard is a co-founder and Lead of Opportunity Lab, an interdisciplinary collective of faculty and research staff at Singapore University of Technology and Design, seeking to enhance the way people design for social change. Victoria trained first as a Biomedical Engineer and then went on to study Development Management. Her current research focuses on understanding "participation" in design with respect to design process, context and agency. As part of her research, she is currently working with communities in India and Singapore on various design projects.

Sanushka Mudaliar was Senior Manager at the Lien Centre for Social Innovation from 2011 to late 2014, where she coordinated the Centre's programmes on unmet social needs, poverty and inequality. Sanushka has managed international development programmes for Oxfam Australia, the Human Rights Council of Australia, Womyn's Agenda for Change (Cambodia) and the Association for Women's Rights in Development (global, based in China).

SOCIAL INNOVATION IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Social innovation is currently all the rage—providing a tantalising hope for new and better ways to solve problems faced by the world's people. Despite its increasing popularity however, social innovation remains an elusive and confusing concept—occasionally working within the scope of the traditional international development or aid sector, and sometimes seemingly more at home in the business world.

Perhaps it is for this reason that in our joint work to use qualitative primary research to design new or improved needs-based social services in Singapore, we have observed little interaction between the subset of practitioners who characterise their work as "social innovation" and others operating in the broad development arena.

We found this quite curious—after all, "finding new and better ways" to respond to social, humanitarian and economic needs is, on the face of it, nothing new. Spontaneous groups of ordinary people, governments, charities, non-government organisations, industry and international organisations have been coming up with ideas to reduce poverty, address social problems and increase livelihoods for centuries.

So what exactly distinguishes "social innovation" from other efforts to address social problems? And what are the potential benefits of greater interaction between the mainstream and the innovators?

Answering these questions involves high stakes. For if there's nothing new in social innovation, then we risk wasting effort, missing key insights, replicating the mistakes of others, and diverting attention and resources away from what might already be working. On the other hand, if truly novel approaches are being missed by other development practitioners, then there is much to be gained from focusing on the unique aspects of social innovation.

In order to answer these questions, we decided to convene a "brain trust" of key people in Singapore with the right experience to help us hash through the issues. The resulting group included practitioners from both for-profit and not-for-profit organisations, academics from Singapore Management University, Nanyang Technological University and Singapore University of Technology and Design, and civil servants who focus on supporting social service organisations. The following points were sparked by our conversations with this group.

What are the fundamental similarities and differences between "social innovation" and other efforts to address development concerns? And how can we harness these to achieve social change?

TOOLS AND METHODS

In response to the complexities of overcoming unmet social needs, all development practitioners now seem well equipped with a range of tools and methods adopted from various sectors—including business, design, communications, anthropology, geography and more. Some segments of the social innovation community actively promote specific toolkits or methodologies. These are often designed to empower people from a range of backgrounds to participate in development initiatives or to support the community at large to generate ideas in response to social problems. This responds to the historical critique that development initiatives suffer

from a so-called "tyranny of experts"[1] and could represent useful disruptions to standard practices and viewpoints.

Possibilities and Pitfalls:

i. Taking action vs oversimplification.

There is no doubt that there is huge benefit in re-thinking approaches, and finding and implementing solutions that solve problems to the benefit of society. There is also great potential for development actors to be shaken out of old practices and patterns. However, our brain trust identified a related danger. A focus on specific tools and methods might lead to oversimplification of complex social problems, or to a focus on only one aspect of an interlinked problem. Real-world social problems are usually multifaceted and interrelated. The uncritical application of tools from different disciplines together with the simplification needed to balance choices and make decisions for a narrowly-focused intervention often obscures the complicated and intricate nature of society's most pressing issues.

A related side effect is that particular tools can overlook the systemic and structural factors at play in major and recurring social needs. Focusing on the micro factors can lead to responses directed at symptoms rather than the root cause. This does not detract from the value of such responses, so long as their limited ability to deal with these macro factors is recognised. Attempts to scale local development "pilots" to the national or international level have met significant failure for these reasons, leading many practitioners to reassess how initiatives are focused and scaled.

ii. Unintended Consequences

Creating large scale and sustainable social change is

extremely difficult and requires long term commitment and a readiness to fail. Sometimes failure is merely the result of an oversight—issues of implementation are complex and need to be considered at all stages of a project—from conception to planning to testing and scaling. The failure to pay attention to implementation can sometimes make stakeholders appear to be doing something substantial, when they are not. As has occurred multiple times in the history of development, the fanfare and attention focused on innovations usually occur at the point of launch rather than when implementation has taken place and the results are in. Any initiative seeking to create social change should not be allowed off the hook for novel ideas that don't work in practice.

iii. Culture and Context
Another related issue is the amount of attention paid to the cultural context in which solutions are applied. The tools of social innovation and development are developed within specific professional and geographical value systems. The unreflective application of these tools might cause practitioners to overlook potential conflicts with the norms and practices associated with creating change in another context.

The boundaries of culture and context are increasingly blurred and arguably, many social needs now reflect universal social values that transcend culture. For instance, cell phones might be used differently in different cultures, but in the right hands, they can help empower nearly everyone. However, it is clear that most problems are still profoundly influenced by context, and by ignoring this, practitioners can risk designing un-implementable solutions and wasting time and money in attempting to scale. Even worse, underestimating the impact of culture can exacerbate problems, with solutions doing more harm than good.

POWER AND PARTICIPATION
Many large-scale development interventions have been criticised for promulgating technocratic solutions and/or promoting ideologically-driven agendas at the expense of participation by the communities involved. The solutions-oriented approach of many social innovators, and their focus on experimentation at a very local level before attempting to scale, provide impetus to development initiatives that seek to involve community members with multiple views and domains of local knowledge.

Possibilities and Pitfalls:
i. Depth of participation
Many processes regardless of their origin continue to engage with people actually affected by the development intervention at a very superficial level, staying within the confines of consultation rather than truly collaborating with people to create change.

Lacking the involvement of sufficiently diverse members of the targeted group can lead to an inadequate brief that does not reflect the complex realities affecting people with unmet needs. These in turn lead to a mismatch in solutions. Many development solutions have been and continue to be discarded because they were designed based on an incomplete understanding of a nuanced situation.

ii. Magnifying rather than managing problems
In poorly managed participatory processes, the powerful individuals or groups that cause the problem in the process are often also invited to address the problem. This is based on an assumption that if all the involved groups were in the same room, focusing intensely on the same problem, they would together recognise the obstacles and design an effective solution.

The sobering reality is that many social problems are caused by the powerful pursuing their own interests—and ignoring the needs of the powerless. Inviting these powerful stakeholders could amount to letting the fox work out how to keep the chickens safe. It is sometimes not in the interests of the powerful to meet unmet needs. Inviting them into the conversation might just reinforce their power.

iii. Property rights and profit
As practitioners move towards alternative models of sustaining their own activities, they have begun to face new challenges. In the current knowledge economy, it is natural for organisations and consultants to keep a handle on their own intellectual property, the bread and butter of their trade. In the case of some development practitioners, this is presented in the form of collections of methods, tools and techniques structured into project "recipes." The need for control over a proprietary tool can affect transparency and empowerment—and either keep the analytical tools in the hands of a select few, or perpetuate a belief that the tools require expert assistance to implement. Equally, the profit motive associated with certain tools encourages overstatement of the impact and importance of these tools.

DEFINING SUCCESS AND EVALUATING RESULTS
Much of the energy in recent development initiatives associated with social innovation has been focused on finding ways to be economically sustainable through the use of social business models. These initiatives have generally attempted to either create businesses which meet social needs in a financially sustainable way or provide resources for fledgling social enterprises such as microcredit schemes.

Proponents of the market system argue that one of its strengths is that businesses typically act more efficiently and productively than most other organisational forms. By this analysis, the profit motive encourages businesses to measure their successes and failures constantly and critically, and to cut whatever doesn't work in order to release resources to support more successful ideas.

By adopting the models and measures of business, some development initiatives such as social businesses are attempting to harness this efficiency and productivity.

Slum housing in Dharavi, India. Source: Jared Tham.

Backpacker tents in Vang Vieng, Laos. Source: Jared Tham.

*Cutting grass the non-electric way in Mumbai, India.
Source: Jared Tham*

"THE SAME CHALLENGES EXIST THAT HAVE ALWAYS BEEN THERE, NAMELY THAT THERE ARE NO QUICK FIXES TO THE COMPLEX CHALLENGES OF POVERTY; THESE CHALLENGES WILL CERTAINLY NOT BE SOLVED BY FOLLOWING A RECIPE; DEVELOPMENT IS INHERENTLY POLITICAL WITH MULTIPLE AGENDAS AND LAYERS OF POWER THAT NEED TO BE EXPLICITLY RECOGNISED AND CAREFULLY NAVIGATED..."

Eco-tourism lodge in Gujarat, India, developed by UNDP. Source: Jared Tham.

Possibilities and Pitfalls:

i. Differences of intent and outcome

Some caution must be exercised in applying general "business practices" to social change. As Jim Collins, a business sustainability and company performance guru, argues:

We must reject the idea—well-intentioned, but dead wrong—that the primary path to greatness in the social sectors is to become "more like a business." Most businesses—like most of anything else in life— fall somewhere between mediocre and good. Few are great. When you compare great companies with good ones, many widely practiced business norms turn out to correlate with mediocrity, not greatness. So, then, why would we want to import the practices of mediocrity into the social sectors?[2]

ii. Who measures success and by what metric?

By having an easily measurable object—profit, businesses have at least one bottom-line against which to measure success. And measuring business efficiency and productivity has a straightforward formula: output over input. The challenge in this context is how to earn more profits (output) while using less time, money or resources (input).

But in this regard, development practitioners face a major problem—how to define the bottom line(s) and measure success? If productivity is "output over input," how do we measure the numerator? The answer is not obvious. Improvement, or lack thereof, is not always obvious or easily measured. Improvements in terms of some social outcomes can trade off with others.

Much time and ink has been spent by development practitioners designing and testing hundreds of monitoring, evaluation, and impact assessment tools—many of which flare into fashion before becoming quickly outdated. Most evaluation tools attempt to answer the question: Who measures success? The government, the social enterprise, "society," or the people experiencing disadvantage or need?

Just as businesses ensure that their owners and investors are satisfied, those in the social sector must think of the needs of their funders. When these needs and interests are aligned with the needs of the community, this can work well. Where there are conflicts, the interests of the funders often come first because they are easily quantifiable and have clear consequences.

This problem is not appreciably different with social enterprises that focus on a double bottom line. Such organisations are justifiably lauded for moving past the often hand-to-mouth existence of traditional charities, and are compelled by market pressures to make themselves more effective and sustainable. The danger is that the more easily measurable revenue generating outcome trumps the often ill-defined social outcome.

iii. Plucking the low-hanging fruit

This problem of focusing on output metrics can lead to another problem: the temptation of aiming for lower-hanging fruit. Different kinds of people have different kinds of unmet needs, and some are more amenable to change than others. A profit-driven output-based mindset can divert attention to the least bad of social problems. Focusing on the social problems that are easily solved is one way to show results, but is often less effective at solving society's most difficult problems.

Similarly, the need for development practitioners to show results from any action also leads to an interest in the lowest-hanging fruit. Designing metrics and indicators of success is the complicated challenge that needs to be overcome if this problem is to be avoided.

iv. Paying attention to those who can pay

On a related note, social enterprises or businesses face an additional challenge: in the case of organisations that focus on a double bottom line, such enterprises often pay more attention to the relatively better off. As the late professor of business C.K. Prahalad famously observed, there are billions at the bottom of the pyramid, and enterprises can help serve the needs of the poor.[3] Many have argued that Prahalad overestimates the disposable wealth among the poor, yet the overall argument remains: people living in poverty may still be able to harness some resources. Yet, the fact remains that the most severe of the poor have no disposable income of any kind. Enterprises that focus on the double bottom line can be tempted to exclude those less able to pay.

Some true believers argue that most or all socially-beneficial activities can be linked to a sustainable revenue stream. However, this view is subject to increasing scrutiny and doubt. Those who question this market-oriented view raise the concern that development players solely focused on revenue-generating activities may effectively siphon away resources that might otherwise be used to cross-subsidise vital activities that can never be self-sustaining.

WAYS FORWARD

So, what are the fundamental differences between "traditional" development practices on the one hand and "social innovation" on the other? Unsurprisingly: not as much as it appears on the surface. The same challenges exist that have always been there, namely that there are no quick fixes to the complex challenges of poverty; these challenges will certainly not be solved by following a recipe; development is inherently political with multiple agendas and layers of power that need to be explicitly recognised and carefully navigated; and finally, the goals and outcomes of development are defined by the value system of the evaluator which may not meet the needs or desires of those requiring most support.

However, although the challenges and concerns of all development practitioners remain the same, there are specific ways that different approaches can support and enhance each other's practices. Social innovation pushes into terrain that generates new insights for development. It has encouraged fresh thinking on process and participation, as well as on the role of business and financial practices in achieving social change. At the same time, social innovators could learn a great deal about the challenges of scale, power and evaluation from past attempts, as well as the successes and failures of other development practitioners in navigating these issues.

Although fail-safe ways to share and navigate these experiences are elusive, it is, to some extent, possible to avoid repeating the same mistakes. The successes and battle scars of past development initiatives—with decades of experience and engagement—can provide essential insights. Likewise, the agile and risk-averse approaches of social innovation—with its creative and generative decision-making processes—can push development thinking in important new directions. For this reason, improved communication between practitioners of different approaches is vital. Joint dialogue and reflection can only help deepen our collective thinking and help practitioners to build on each other's victories and avoid some of the pitfalls that await anyone who aspires to respond to social needs. ∎

Endnotes
1   William Easterly, *The Tyranny of Experts: Economics, Dictators and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

2   Jim Collins, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors: A Monograph to Accompany Good to Great* (Boulder: Jim Collins, 2005).

3   C. K. Prahalad, *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid* (Upper Saddle River: Wharton School Publishing, 2005).