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Citation

Hare, L., & Garcia Contreras, R. (2021). “Arkansas Global Changemakers and the effect of collaborative and disruptive strategies”. *Multilateralism, Human Rights and Diplomacy: A Global Perspective* Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/arkglobalrespub/1>

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“Arkansas Global Changemakers and the effect of collaborative and disruptive strategies”

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Since its popularization in the 1990s, the meaning and scope of so-called disruptive innovation has expanded dramatically. What was at first a concept limited to analyses of business performance and the impact of new technologies on consumer markets has since come to encompass a wide range of organizational activity. Crucially, the discussion has shifted from considerations of disruption as a simple effect of change to discussions of disruption as strategy. Along with this transformation have come new questions about those who carry out ostensibly disruptive innovations, how innovations come to be disruptive, and to what ends.⁶⁷⁹

In this essay, we consider the ways in which disruptive strategies align with collaborative strategies to produce innovations aimed at ameliorating global challenges in the twenty-first century. Specifically, we consider how they work through our current initiative, Arkansas Global Changemakers, which creates new international partnerships at the local level in order to challenge long-standing obstacles to global social change.

Our project began in 2018 at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, Arkansas, USA. The purpose was to find new ways of enhancing local approaches to issues that manifest at the local level but that also possess clear global corollaries. We accomplish this by facilitating dialogue among change agencies at home with organizations facing similar challenges in communities around the world. The goals are to exchange ideas, harness the power of local agency, and use a cross-

⁶⁷⁹ Clayton M. Christensen, Rory McDonald, Elizabeth Altman, and Jonathan E. Palmer, “Disruptive Innovation: An Intellectual History and Directions for Future Research,” *Journal of Management Studies* 55, no. 7 (2018):1043-1078; 1048-51.

border and cross-cultural dialogue to disrupt old ways of thinking about global problems and develop more effective approaches. The initiative builds upon longstanding research into the notion of “glocalism,” which, as the sociologist Roland Robertson has explained, posits a mutually-constitutive relationship between notions of globality and locality.⁶⁸⁰ This dynamic, we believe, applies equally to the ways in which many global social and environmental problems manifest themselves uniquely in specific communities, countries, and regions. Cultural, geographic, and infrastructural differences not only shape the ways in which societies experience common challenges, but also inform the ways that the issues are conceived, addressed, and measured.

With this point of departure, Arkansas Global Changemakers endeavors to study and understand these differences and find ways to utilize the opportunities that they create for innovation. In this way, the project reflects the familiar adage, “think global, act local,” but it also flips the idea, “think local, act global.” In other words, it disrupts simple distinctions between notions of locality and globality and expands the scope of possibility for what constitutes active engagement in global integration. It also treats local or national organizations as components of a broader global civil society, inviting them to rethink their community work as part of a larger framework.

Arkansas Global Changemakers creates space for new collaboration and for new collaborators, beginning with students. The project seeks to train the next generation of changemakers through experiential and global learning combining classroom study, study abroad, and hands-on community engagement. Guided by a multidisciplinary faculty team, students learn about the global and local dimensions of key challenges that affect our home state. Salient issue areas include food insecurity, public health, sustainable urban development, and job skill development. Participating faculty help students situate local challenges in a broader context and align them with the **United Nations Sustainable Development Goals**. At the same time, students and faculty participate in targeted on-campus courses, where they interact with partner organizations in Arkansas, with analogous organizations in communities abroad, and with university partners around the world. To prepare students for these interactions, the course training includes intercultural competence modules modeling

680 Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992); Robertson, “Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity,” in *Global Modernity*, edited by Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson (London: Sage, 1995), 25–44.

successful intercultural encounters and leading students to reflect on conversations with international partners. At the same time, hands-on analysis of community organizations and supportive mentorship from community practitioners help students learn about the importance of social innovation and social business development while also cultivating networks to promote advanced learning through internships, field research, or other experiential opportunities.

Networks are critical to our approach because they facilitate a better understanding of how social change ecosystems operate within communities. They help us learn not only how individuals and individual organizations address specific challenges, but also how organizations across sectors—government agencies, NGOs, INGOs, and academic institutions—work together to effect change. During the process of analyzing these organizations and ecosystems, students collaborate with community partners to identify operational problems, inefficiencies, or opportunities for improvement. They also join faculty in investigating the areas in which organizations could strengthen relationships or identify new ways to collaborate with other agencies in their communities.

At each step, students apply intercultural skills and global learning while also practicing social innovation techniques by participating in and even facilitating dialogue between organizations in Arkansas communities and those in selected cities and international regions. For the partner agencies, the connections serve to raise awareness of the global dimension of their work while also showcasing the differences in conceptions of and approaches to similar challenges. For advanced students and for faculty, a successful outcome can include adapting innovations across cultural boundaries to improve approaches or increasing the scalability, sustainability, and viability of innovations, both at home and abroad.

As a final component of the project, the team maintains a website (<http://globalchangemakers.uark.edu>) highlighting our initiatives and inviting the public to take part in book club discussions and lectures on global issues. This serves to expand the circle of local agency and to foster the bonds within and among communities. Here, Arkansas Global Changemakers offers an opportunity to debate firsthand the role of social innovation strategies in our global efforts to build a more prosperous, peaceful, and sustainable future. It creates a space for insiders and outsiders alike to reflect critically on both the individual outcomes and the Arkansas Global Changemakers approach itself.

Such debates are critical, since there is no doubt that discussing social innovation strategies as vehicles for a sustainable future can be controversial. Even academic debates about the purpose of social innovation and its place in a free-market economy can take on an unyielding, ideological character. This includes the debate over disruptive strategies, but also more specifically the question over whether collaborative strategies can act as positive disruption to generate impact in the social or economic spheres. It seems that for every theorist who claims that the potential of these strategies is overlooked, there is another who insists that their impact is overblown.⁶⁸¹ It is not our purpose here to rehearse the debate, but merely to our experience with Arkansas Global Changemakers, we believe that they often intersect in important and productive ways.

Let us start with some sort of consensus. For many, collaborative strategies are an opportunity to connect and celebrate the vision and value proposition of the community we want to create. They offer a way for individual concerns to grow into effective community-wide efforts. As an example, what initially may have started as an effort to address the particular disability of a loved one (think of a mom determined to help her autistic child develop basic job skills), potentially could be transformed into a scalable social enterprise, as long as the proposed solution—the entrepreneurial endeavor—is designed and executed within the context of a collaborative strategy. This kind of strategy is capable of fostering networks, community partners, and like-minded initiatives eager to address significant social gaps. Collaborative strategies are at the core of many successful social innovations, as they can optimize existing resources rather than including or incorporating new ones. Moreover, they serve to enlist capacity available close to home, enhance local agency, and draw upon on-the-ground knowledge. Rather than relying solely on outside intervention or looking to the next technological invention, the social innovations that will help us move the needle will come from our ability to understand the problem as well as the ecosystem in which this problem has emerged and to effectively utilize the resources on hand to address it.

Disruptive strategies, meanwhile, operate in a much larger and more ideologically ambiguous field. In her writing for the *New York Times*,

⁶⁸¹ See for instance Michael Avitel, et al, "The Collaborative Economy: A Disruptive Innovation or Much Ado about Nothing?" *Proceedings of the 35th International Conference on Information Systems*, edited by Elena Karahanna, Ananth Srinivasand, and Bernad Tan (Atlanta: Association for Information Systems, 2014), Accessed 26 April 2021, <http://icis2014.aisnet.org/>. See also John Kania and Mark Kramer, "Collective Impact," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Winter 2011): 36–41.

journalist Jill Lepore has revealed vastly different perspectives on what “innovation,” “innovators,” and “disruption” mean.⁶⁸² Whether an approach, technique, or mechanism is innovative depends on a number of factors, including the environment into which it is introduced, the degree to which a new aspect is anticipated or even possible within a community or organization, and the way in which its effects are perceived by agents and beneficiaries. In a similar way, what is considered disruptive in certain places under certain socioeconomic or cultural circumstances may not be so in other cases. Within this context, in which disruption and innovation are valued but uncertain, it is possible to conceive a role for collaborative approaches. Indeed, Steve Davis argues that collaboration can be a defining feature of positive innovation. As he unapologetically writes:

The kind of innovation I am describing –whether in health care, economic development, or other areas—requires a high level of collaboration rather than competition. It means sticking with good ideas until the end—making sure that we put the mechanisms and support in place to bring them through research, development, and introduction, and to scale them up so that we can reach as many people as possible. It means adapting to geopolitical and technological evolutions, and working across borders and sectors to turn great ideas into transformational changes.”⁶⁸³

As the founders of Arkansas Global Changemakers, we similarly believe “disruption” and “innovation” matter, and the place where they matter most is in the collective efforts to improve the socio-economic and environmental viability of our existence. In a world of limited resources and fragile ecosystems, the combination of collaborative and disruptive strategies aimed at doing more with less, are crucial to our approach. By promoting basic principles in social innovation and intercultural competency as the preamble for global social change, we share and explore with our faculty and students the tools and methodologies designed to support, execute, optimize, and scale cross-sector collaborations.

In his writings on innovation, business and enterprise researcher Jaideep Prabhu reminds us that “the creation of faster, better and cheaper solutions for more people employing minimal resources—is already taking place in core sectors such as manufacturing, food,

682 Jill Lepore. “The Disruption Machine,” *The New Yorker* 90, no. 17 (2014): 30.

683 Davis, Steve. “Disruptive Innovation: Where It Matters Most,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (24 June 2014), Accessed 25 April 2021, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/disruptive_innovation_where_it_matters_most#

automotive, and energy in developing and developed economies.”⁶⁸⁴ Disruptive strategies are not only about the optimization of existing resources to accomplish more, with less, for more but also about cross-sector collaborations. They are characterized by their expressed mission to foster the interaction between large and small firms as well as between firms, international organizations, and consumers, all to make change possible. Disruptive strategies include the participation of governments and public institutions in helping implement initiatives whenever free-market mechanisms alone will not suffice and assessing impact to determine the scalability of a particular innovation.

Up to this point, there has been no significant controversy in the ways we have considered collaborative and disruptive strategies in this essay. We can even identify at least two areas of meaningful overlap between them:

- Collaboration is critical to procure meaningful, disruptive change.
- Disruptive change depends on the efficient optimization and collaboration of existing resources.

But what happens when disruptive strategies challenge the foundation of the very same structures that make the strategy possible? In other words, what happens when the disruptive strategy becomes an attempt, in and of itself, of challenging and if possible changing the same organizations, networks, and hierarchies that constitute the *status quo*? At the global level, this is clearly what is needed to tackle the most pressing worldwide issues of our day. On a planet of 7.5 billion people projected to grow to 10.5 billion in a matter of 30 years, where the majority of the population will live competing with the same finite resources, we must learn, as the title of Prabhu’s suggests, “to do more, with less, for more.”⁶⁸⁵ This is a guiding principle in the world of disruptive strategies, but does it apply to societies as well as to corporations and organizations? This is an especially daunting problem in a post-industrial age of great wealth. In 1958, John Kenneth Galbraith asked whether the future could be secured through the creation of “the affluent society,” and now the question is whether our future can survive it. In a wealthy, comfortable society, in which, to borrow Galbraith’s words, “the production of goods and services is the measure of civilized success,” can we reinvent ourselves?⁶⁸⁶

684 Jaideep Prabhu, “Frugal Innovation: Doing More, with Less, for More,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 375, no. 2095 (2017): <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsta.2016.0372>.

685 Prabhu, “Frugal Innovation.”

686 John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, Fortieth Anniversary Edition (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), ix.

Thinking creatively about our future might be the reason why Chamath Palihapitiya, one of the original members of the Facebook team, believes that if talented innovators are spending their time inventing the next must-have product for middle-class families, they are missing a tremendous opportunity to use their talent on the issues where disruptive innovation truly matters most. They could, for example, pursue initiatives to save people's lives, including our own, as the viability of our existence becomes more and more uncertain. Innovating with a focus on a quick return is not, as he explains, "how you solve diabetes. It is not how you use precision medicine to cure cancer. It is not how you educate broad swaths of the world's population."⁶⁸⁷

Perhaps one reason that many innovators hesitate to heed Palihapitiya's advice is the fine and, at times, blurry line between the notion of social entrepreneurship and social innovation. Some insist on a strict understanding of social entrepreneurship as the art of having a triple bottom line. It is not only about a financial return, but also about a social and environmental return of investment. Social innovation is thus a preamble to social entrepreneurship and an indispensable element. David Bornstein and Susan Davis have gone so far as to define social entrepreneurship in these terms, calling it "a process by which citizens build or transform institutions to advance solutions to social problems ... in order to make life better for many."⁶⁸⁸ Yet it is easy to lose sight of this point, in part because social innovation extends beyond the realm of business. Solutions to social problems have historically come from the nonprofit, grass-roots, and the governmental and non-governmental sectors. These varied sources of change share a primary commitment to creating social value. This means a lot of the initiatives that impact our communities, are not necessarily rooted in the expectation of a financial return on investment.

Nevertheless, entrepreneurial principles can make profound contributions to social innovation, perhaps most significantly through the insertion of financial incentives along the value chain. Social value creation is a slow, difficult process, and it can be greatly accelerated and amplified through financial incentives and business innovations. They can also provide a means of tracking impact through both financial and non-financial indicators. In this way, social entrepreneurship

687 Quoted in Bill Snyder, "Chamath Palihapitiya: Why Failing Fast Fails." *Insights by Stanford Business* (12 December 2017). Accessed 26 April 2021, <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/chamath-palihapitiya-why-failing-fast-fails>

688 David Bornstein and Susan Davis, *Social Entrepreneurship: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1.

and innovation coalesce as a potential point of intersection among collaborative and disruptive innovative strategies.

A second fundamental obstacle to this sort of innovative social change stems from the conflation of economic and moral values. In this case, the virtue of social entrepreneurship can also be its greatest challenge, as balancing profit and purpose can appear to be a zero-sum game. In *Utopia for Realists*, Rutger Bregman argues that our lack of imagination when confronting the pressing issues of our day is the result of a one-dimensional notion of what is good. "Progress," he writes, "has become synonymous with economic prosperity, but the twenty-first century will challenge us to find other ways of boosting our quality of life."⁶⁸⁹ Even within the realm of economics, we often miss the opportunity to adopt a better, more moral approach. Indeed, this view has informed the work of historian Riane Eisler, whose call for a new "caring economics" begins with a rejection of the *status quo*. She declares, "We must also develop new economic indicators, rules, policies, and practices guided by values appropriate for the more equitable and sustainable future we want and need."⁶⁹⁰

A third obstacle to collaborative and disruptive strategies relates to our preconceptions about social innovators and the innovations they champion. We tend either to romanticize them as unfailing geniuses, or we dismiss them as dreamers or outliers. The first view precludes our sense of urgency for collaboration. We find cause to abandon our own social responsibility to be an active part of any solutions, because we use the promise of innovation as a panacea and as an excuse to wash our own hands of any responsibility to change. The second view leads to fatalism about disruption. We see no way out of our present circumstances and thus close the door on the possibility of meaningful change. The only way we can demystify innovators is to get to know them. As the students in our program learn, these real heroes are among us, and it is simply a matter of appreciating their work, their genuine limits, and their actual potential. Moreover, it is about finding points where others can support their work and even join their ranks.

Our region, Northwest Arkansas, is home to a large academic institution, the University of Arkansas, and a number of large corporations, including Walmart, Tyson Foods, and J.B. Hunt Transportation. But there is also a vibrant and growing community of smaller social innovators and entrepreneurs who are pushing the envelope of value

689 Rutger Bregman, *Utopia for Realists: How We Can Build the Ideal World* (New York: Hachette, 2017), 19.

690 Riane Eisler, *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler, 2007), 21.

generation. The Station, Seeds that Feed, Partners for Better Housing, Arkansas Support Network, Food Loops, Potter's House, Beautiful Lives Boutiques, Rockin' Baker, the Blue Door, Soul Harbor, the Biliiteracy Project, and many, many others, are all concrete examples of inclusive, collaborative, and in some cases disruptive social innovations, either with a for profit or non-for profit angle. Through the Arkansas Global Changemakers project, our students learn from these innovators, and at the same time work with faculty and international partners to help them improve their work and enhance their impact.

If we are genuinely interested in generating real, long-lasting social change, there are a few things we need to know:

- Collaboration is key. We will never do it alone;
- We must shoot for a sense of justice. At its minimum, we need to follow a fundamental (and universal) sense of justice, and
- Real change takes time. Actual, long-lasting transformation is more about connecting the existing dots and optimizing existing resources than trying to disrupt, with one shot, the entire system. Aim instead to disrupt the conditions that create the injustice, one step at the time.

Such considerations are probably the only way to create agency in people. This is the only way for us, as potential users, customers, or beneficiaries of a disruptive strategy to embrace the change and make it ours.

And this is precisely why we created Arkansas Global Changemakers. The initiative is not only an opportunity to fill our days with purpose, but also a tremendous opportunity to create, to innovate, and to meet outstanding changemakers, making a difference in the world on a daily basis. It is a unique window on the world, one that beckons our fellow Arkansans to look outside their communities and that invites others to see the extraordinary innovators in our state who are transforming the world. If we want to foster collaborative and disruptive strategies to do more, with less, for more, and to secure sustainable peace in our planet, it is imperative to connect and recognize in each other our fears and aspirations. Learning globally to act locally and vice versa become *sine qua non* mindsets to propel effective change and to remind us that the viability of our future depends on the sustainability of our entire ecosystem. This is the reason why the Arkansas Global Changemakers team believes that the power of meaningful innovations resides on four essential characteristics:

- The simplicity and universality of the initiative;
- The agency and sense of ownership such initiative creates;
- The commitment to develop and execute rigorous impact assessments; and
- The commitment to the core mission of the project.

Disruptive transformation requires collaboration. There is no such thing as a disruptive strategy without a collaborative strategy. At Arkansas Global Changemakers, we believe that change does not start with more aware and conscious entrepreneurs, but with more aware and conscious citizens, and as citizens, we do not only vote through our purchasing power; rather, we impact the world through our ability to connect and empathize.

Change starts with us.