Panel discussion on social entrepreneurship:
New avenues for job creation and social inclusion

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Seeking new certainties: the blurring of boundaries in knowledge production and consumption

It is a strange contradiction, that whilst "expertise" has never been either as widespread or in such demand as today, public willingness to challenge that expertise has also never been as high (Nowotny 1999). In part this is driven by the nature of our globalised world in which connectedness scales up the problems we face and at the same time obscures the relationships between cause and effect. The fact that local happenings seem to be shaped by forces and events occurring many miles away, creates a heightened sense of uncontrollability.

In the light of this overwhelming uncertainty, people seem to want to develop a new sense of assurance based in part on a re-appropriation of knowledge in the social sphere. They want to have a say in the knowledge that is generated and how it is understood and applied.

This trend is enhanced by the increasing commodification of everyday life where public thirst for innovation around consumption is unprecedented. People are more and more demanding and discriminating. They want what they want, exactly how they want it. In higher income societies at least, this seems to be as true for consumption of public as much as private goods.

Accelerating demands mean that the public sphere is unable to keep pace with the demands of consumers. This has been compounded by the recent global economic collapse and the need to retrench public spending.

Driven by the challenges associated with the ownership of knowledge and how that knowledge is deployed, the boundaries between experts, producers, entrepreneurs, social actors and the wider public has become blurred whenever one speaks of users and producers of knowledge. Increasingly, the interaction between all of these parties is considered an important precondition for technological and social innovations to occur, to be disseminated or to be delivered.

What we might call the "customer" for knowledge is increasingly moving from a position of passively receiving innovation to actively demanding it. At its most extreme, the "customer" is increasingly a supplier of innovation through all kinds of participatory frameworks. What is being created is a new public space where science and society, the market and politics, co-mingle. More and more, the desires of both consumers and citizens are articulated here alongside the voice of expertise.

Spanning boundaries – dealing with "wicked" problems

But it is not just public demand or the commodification of everyday life that makes the blurring of these boundaries so important. In Rittel and Webber's (1973) terminology – many of societies' problems are no longer "tame" – in the sense that they can be solved by hierarchical or technocratic models of leadership, management or knowledge creation. Instead they are "wicked" - so complex and intractable that they require knowledge and action to be developed across boundaries of culture, discipline, sector and business model.

"Wicked" problems defy hierarchy and require a model of leadership and conditions for collaboration that develop solutions not based simply in the lab, in the company research and development department, or in the policy think tank but which are socially reflexive and negotiated in the public space.

As Keith Grint (2010) highlights, a wicked problem "cannot simply be removed from its environment, solved and returned without affecting the environment. Moreover, there is no clear relationship between cause

and effect". Such problems actively require new approaches to find solutions. It requires the art of engaging communities in facing up to complex collective problems through collaborative processes (Grint 2010).

Such overwhelming complexity involves bringing together not just the public sector and government but also increasingly, business and the non-profit sector to find solutions. There are many different approaches to generating such cross community, collaboration (see, for example, Nambisan 2009 on exploration, experimentation and execution). A critical requirement, however, is the ability to span boundaries both horizontally – across disciplines, sectors, communities and countries - and vertically – transcending hierarchies, bringing together establishment actors with non-establishment and emergent players.

Transactional or transformational? The role of social entrepreneurs in social innovation

As a result of this kind of collaborative endeavour, social innovation is not only about new ideas, new institutions, or new ways of working that meet social needs more effectively. It also leaves behind compelling new social relationships between previously separate individuals and groups. These relationships can matter greatly to the people involved – creating a new sense of identity and belonging. Moreover, they contribute to the diffusion and embedding of the innovation and fuel a cumulative dynamic whereby each innovation opens up the possibility of further innovations.

A critical role is played by the 'connectors' in any innovation system – the brokers, entrepreneurs and institutions that link together people, ideas, money and power. This is one of the more profound roles that social entrepreneurs can and should be encouraged to play. Above all, we need to be cautious and recognise that social enterprise, which uses business models to address a social need, is not innovative *per se* and the simple existence of social entrepreneurs as new kinds of operatives in social service delivery, does not necessarily deliver social innovation of the kind I am describing.

Social innovation because of the connections it makes in relation to the some of the more complex challenges we face, almost inevitably starts to redefine social challenges as well as providing solutions. Put another way, it redefines the questions we ask not simply the answers we find. In doing so, it becomes a transformational force for society – helping it reframe its challenges, dilemmas and solutions.

Without this more profound element of connection and redefinition, social entrepreneurship risks becoming just another kind of commodification of everyday life – a way of offloading a service delivery function, plugging a gap in the social fabric. This is a reductive kind of social innovation with social entrepreneurs treated as transactional rather than transformational actors.

Spanning boundaries – generic principles, diverse tools

Essentially the process of social innovation I am describing is a cultural interaction that seeks to integrate perspectives and voices - up, down and across – transcending boundaries in the pursuit of a way forward.

There are at least three critical factors necessary to lead or facilitate this process:

- An understanding of the many actors involved and mechanisms to uncover or reveal those actors who are not readily identifiable;

- The convening authority to bring together networks or create networks across the relevant "communities";

- The establishment of credibility, legitimacy and trust as conditions for that convening authority.

This is a tall order. Not many individuals or institutions have this kind of convening authority either locally or nationally and certainly not internationally. But social entrepreneurs can be critical in pulling these kinds of networks together.

There are many tools to promote collaboration, dialogue and action across boundaries. Whilst given the new insights they generate, the diversity of tools is welcome, I would suggest a set of generalised principles

against which their effectiveness can be tested. To work productively in order to deliver social innovation, individuals, organisations and institutions need tools that:

- Develop self-awareness of their own culture and an awareness of where that culture sits within other cultures;

- Build capacity to operate across these cultures;

- Move from dialogue and discourse into action.

Furthermore, I believe that the following conditions are necessary for spanning boundaries effectively:

- There must be a willingness and intent to work with and embrace difference;

- There must be the possibility for influence and change from all actors;

- There must be an awareness of dependencies and inequalities in the interaction across boundaries and an attempt to mitigate against those dependencies and inequalities.

These principles, I think, start to frame the way in which social entrepreneurship can be positioned to help build a more inclusive, fairer and economically sound and sustainable society. They help position social entrepreneurship as a transformational rather than a transactional force in society.

In conclusion: living with uncertainty

Given the complexity and intractability of many of the issues we face, whilst we might possibly be able to reach a consensus on the step change required to address the problems we face, the breakthrough in solving it can often only be defined two or three steps ahead. This kind of ambiguity and incompleteness is not entirely palatable to a leadership and public that demands decisive, definitive and immediate answers.

Managing that uncertainty is a major challenge for leaders and institutions. In a world of complexity, uncertainty and rapid change, we have to come to terms with the fact that we can never quite see the solution in its totality. Instead, we need to seek reassurance in our ability to build processes that deliver adaptability, flexibility and trust in the face of the unknown.

As a result, the legitimacy of institutions (global, national and local) and the legitimacy of the solutions they generate through social innovation come not simply from the process of deliberation but explicitly from the institutional commitment and openness to difference and from their ability to reflect upon their own objectives, strategies and institutional form in the light of that commitment (Goodwin 1998).

In conclusion:

- Social entrepreneurs can be seen as transactional or transformational actors in society;

- To tackle the really difficult challenges we face, they need to be transformational both in helping to define those difficult issues and in building connections that can really deliver social innovation;

- To be transformational, the right conditions need to be in place;

- Those conditions need to deliver adaptability, flexibility and mutual trust in the face of the unknown.

Tree Aid is a UK-based charity supporting families and communities in Africa's drylands to tackle poverty and protect their environment using trees. The views expressed in this piece are those of the author.

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