by Sunit Shrestha and S. Dev Appanah

Across the globe, social entrepreneurship is gathering momentum. More and more social entrepreneurs have gained recognition in countries as diverse as India and the United States and the concept itself has spread all the way from the rural communities that Ashoka Fellows serve to the United Nations. Yet the future impact of the movement lies with youth. In Asia, young people make up almost half of the population. Young people have the passion and energy, the strategic social positioning, and the natural tendency towards problem-solving that is a key characteristic of the entrepreneurial ‘ground-clearing’ process. If social entrepreneurship is to bring increased efficiency and innovation to conventional development, the most dynamic young people must actively embrace it.

Social movements have this in common with epidemics, that in order for them to spread, they must have an average reproduction rate of at least one. If not, the disease will never become an epidemic and the social movement will expend itself with time. If talented young people are not attracted and catalysed by social entrepreneurship, the movement could die out.

This article looks at four key things that will be necessary if young people are to embrace social entrepreneurship: knowledge, community, finance and mentorship.

Development – an image problem

Additionally, the development profession is an obsolete brand, in a world where brands represent meaning and value; development as a profession ranks much lower for young people than the private sector or government. This is especially true in developing countries where most people in this field are perceived to have taken a vow of poverty and sacrifice. The labels ‘NGO’ and ‘CSO’ have negative connotations and the agencies they are attached to are seen as being irrationally radical and uncompromising. Bureaucracy, egoism and inertia make the sector exceptionally inefficient. Worse still, jobs are badly paid. In Asia, where family influence is still paramount, it is extremely rare for families to encourage their offspring to join the development sector because of the lack of opportunity, low pay and little social recognition it offers. Ironically, then, it is extremely difficult to find capable young people from developing countries who are interested in a career in development.

Social entrepreneurship might be able to remedy this. The stories of successful social entrepreneurs show what development professionalism can mean. These people are passionate, dynamic, efficient and innovative, and eager to make a difference in the world. Repeatedly, they have proved that small things do matter and can become socially significant while generating a fair amount of personal income. They provide models that show capable young people that social entrepreneurship can offer a career that provides both social and economic returns.

Providing the conditions for growth

But how many capable young people take this path? Young social entrepreneurs – and there might be any number of these – are unrecognized as yet, both locally and globally, and there is next to no support for this group of potential changemakers.

It is young people who are both willing and able to become social entrepreneurs who will trigger any movement, and it is the environment in which they operate that will
either kill or facilitate their development. We believe there are four key elements here: knowledge, community, finance and mentorship.

**Knowledge for development**

There are at least three critical kinds of knowledge required to unleash the spirit of social entrepreneurship which we believe young people possess:

- insight into social problems
- examples of social entrepreneurs, particularly younger ones
- knowledge of the social entrepreneurship process

These three categories of knowledge reinforce each other. Young people need a knowledge of the world’s problems to ignite their passion; they also need insight into development issues in order to develop their social enterprise ideas. For these ideas to be sustainable, a disciplined method of enterprise management is required. And, perhaps most important of all, they need inspirational cases of young social entrepreneurs who have made a significant impact.

**A handful of examples**

The number of these cases remains small, but their impact on the field has been great. An outstanding project aimed at disadvantaged youth is **Digital Divide Data (DDD)** in Cambodia. DDD, founded by young social entrepreneurs, creates non-profit data entry outsourcing centres that hire disadvantaged young people at wages far above local standards. The centres not only provide vocational training and job opportunities, but also scholarships for employees to complete their education, health benefits and a safer working environment. DDD became financially sustainable in only nine months and has to date earned six-figure revenues.

**Meal Exchange** was founded by young social entrepreneurs in Canada, has developed an innovative programme by which students are able to transform unused meal plan points into groceries, which they can then deliver to local community organizations and food banks. Meal Exchange is run as a franchise, and currently up to 45 post-secondary and five secondary educational institutions across Canada have a Meal Exchange Chapter. It is estimated that in the year 2003 alone, over $260,000 worth of food was donated to community organizations.

**Mitra Technology Foundation** is an initiative in India that acts as an online volunteer brokerage. Through its flagship programme, ‘iVolunteer’, Mitra works with several other organizations across India to create volunteering opportunities for individuals who want to make a difference. To date several thousands of volunteers have been recruited.

Another youth initiative is Bangkok-based **TRN**, which tries to find ways of using ICT to cost-effectively empower rural communities across Thailand. These young social entrepreneurs have undertaken various community-based agro and development tourism programmes. Working in partnership with rural communities, its agro project has wedded traditional local and scientific knowledge to solve local problems in relation to sustainable agriculture. For many of the beneficiary villagers, food security and real income have improved. These farmers then become the role model for thousands of others.

**Spreading the word**

Knowledge of these and other examples needs to be disseminated in such a way that it appeals to a young audience: via a Lonely Planet-like guide for young social entrepreneurs, for instance, or through media like MTV and other more serious ones featuring exciting examples of young
social entrepreneurs as part of their programming.

Various online and offline tools could also be created to help young people manage their social enterprises. These could range from subjects like business planning to comprehensive project management. However, the greatest challenge is in persuading young people to contribute to the knowledge component. Perhaps they could provide the necessary input through things like articles, journals or weblogs.

There is great potential to make social entrepreneurship ‘cool’ in the way that conventional business entrepreneurship, particularly startups, is. This could help attract highly capable youngsters into the loop.

**The importance of communities**

Without communities, however, even the best knowledge base will be of limited usefulness. David Borstein, author of How to Change the World, emphasizes that one of the best ways of supporting young social entrepreneurs is to bring those with similar passion and insight together to share and collaborate. Through the sharing of ideas, a community is created, and through this community information passes on, becomes critically relevant, and can lead to future action.

Communities don’t have to be ‘local’ in the geographic sense any more. The internet has changed that. Now, communities can be virtual, bringing together those with common interests and purposes, no matter what their location. In this way youth all over the world who are interested in social entrepreneurship can share and crystallize ideas, gain support, mobilize teams, and even collaborate online. Translating thought into social action through communities becomes exponentially rapid.

Take the case of TakingITglobal, it is probably the world’s largest online community of young people interested in global development issues ranging from poverty to the promotion of healthcare. With more than 54,000 members, TakingITglobal receives more than 1.2 million hits daily. Its content and presentation attract young people and reflect their energy and ideas.

**Communities drive the collective discovery process.** Members don’t need to know or learn everything to solve problems or make necessary connections. As long as the community is diverse enough, members can find solutions to problems by sharing their experience and knowledge. If a young social entrepreneur in Nigeria, for example, needs a governmental endorsement to implement her enterprise effectively but lacks the necessary contacts, a virtual global community of other young social entrepreneurs could provide her with those contacts.

**Building movements through communities**

Stanley Milgram’s ‘six degrees of separation’ theory suggests that people are connected by a chain of six people most of the time: beginning from you and your immediate community, you can reach millions of people via linkages spreading out from your initial contacts. For example, you and I might be separated by only three degrees of separation. You are reading this magazine because someone you know in the social investment community has recommended it to you. That person might know the editor, who might know us.

The most common problem in a networked world is locating the necessary contacts. Community-building is one key means of transforming the global search into a more manageable local one, but with global connections (for instance, figuring out who among your immediate community of friends has access to another set of credible connections that could link you to, say, a donor agency or those with similar experience in addressing social issues).
The trick, therefore, is to build the network of communities in such a way that young social entrepreneurs can effectively link to their desired community of contacts in relatively few steps. ‘Effectively’ means that the process must be two-way. Not only must young social entrepreneurs be able easily to track down the contacts they need, but there must be a willingness on the other side to respond to them. Thus, not only do we need to facilitate young people’s communities, we must also tap into existing networks or create new ones of those who can help young social entrepreneurs. These supporting networks – of donors, media, consultants, or whatever – must understand how they can help young social entrepreneurs and be prepared to do this.

As with a physical community, the means of integrating various groups within the community must be tailored to each of them. For example, the core group of any young social entrepreneurship movement would consist of young social entrepreneurs totally committed to their ideas, while other interest groups within the movement might be more concerned with the concept of social entrepreneurship on a more theoretical level. In building the movement, the needs of both groups must be taken account of, but in such a way that the groups reinforce each other.

Social movements can be seen as an evolving network of highly clustered communities linked to each other to achieve common aims or express common values. By managing the formation process strategically, the network can provide productive interactions which are critical for the success of young social entrepreneurs, allowing them to navigate the complex world of development effectively with limited resources and capabilities.

The challenge of resource mobilization

Even for fairly successful social entrepreneurs, raising money and resources to start a social enterprise from scratch is not easy. For young social entrepreneurs it is almost impossible. Generally, donors require grantees to have a formally registered organization. In most developing countries, particularly India and Thailand, this requirement is often prohibitive for young social entrepreneurs because of the amount of ‘red tape’ involved. International fundraising involves even more regulatory complications. Unless this problem is resolved, even the most energetic and innovative groups of young people will abandon their social development ideas.

Apart from formal requirements on the donor side, there is a problem of trust. In developing countries, especially in Asia, initiatives carried out by young people meet with great scepticism. Social norms such as respect for seniority reinforce this. Even in the business sector, the phenomenon of young super-successful entrepreneurs, common in the global North, is largely absent in most southern nations. The financing problem that young social entrepreneurs encounter, therefore, reflects a cultural bias against youth-based initiatives.

More than just money

Financing for young social entrepreneurs requires more than just giving them money. As with any start-ups, financing, mentoring and incubation are critical to their success. Young people might be the most passionate, innovative and devoted group of people on the planet, but they’re also the least experienced. Without good mentors and an incubation service, their failure rate can be very high. Thus, engaged financing or venture philanthropy-like models are needed. Knowledge transfers from business start-ups to social enterprise start-ups might be extremely useful.

However, young people also have an advantage in resource mobilization. Youth is probably the only stage of life when you can knock on anyone’s door, from corpora-
tions to UN agencies, and ask for help for a socially worthwhile project without being accused of having a hidden agenda. Once the barrier of mistrust is removed, older people are often more than willing to put their experience at the disposal of the young, and young people must learn to capitalize on this.

**Towards a self-sustaining movement**

There are many initiatives which aim to help catalyse a young social entrepreneur movement. One of them, the Youth Social Enterprise Initiative (YSEI), is a Global Knowledge Partnership (GKP) programme (see [www.globalknowledge.org](http://www.globalknowledge.org)) driven by several of the younger members of the network that focus on ICT for development. It is a joint programme developed by members across the globe providing an integrated support mechanism for young social entrepreneurs which includes information, community networking, financing/resources and mentorship. It has gained support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and will be launched very soon.

What we envisage is a self-sustaining process. Young social entrepreneurs’ networks will be catalysed by the diffusion of information on youth-tailored social entrepreneurship, and the relationship of young social entrepreneurs with each other through the networks will make them more effective in terms of both resource mobilization and impact. Once more and more talented young people are attracted and begin new social enterprises, their interactions with each other through the networks will generate new feedback, making the networks more effective and so more attractive to new social entrepreneurs. They will evolve without central control and will facilitate the development of a youth social entrepreneurs’ movement.

These networks will provide the opportunity for every young person driven to change the world. Because of the supportive environment they provide, social entrepreneurship for the young will become possible. It may also become desirable. If this happens, then the vision of social entrepreneurship as a global movement might become a reality. Who can say what the implications of this would be for the survival of the human race?

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