

HOW SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS UNLEASH HUMAN POTENTIAL



THE YEAR WAS 1995. A young, smart actuary and self-described ‘hardened capitalist’ named **Taddy Blecher** had accepted an offer from U.S. consultancy **Monitor**, packed his bags, and was about to board a flight from Johannesburg to Boston when he changed his mind — and as it turned out, the course of his life.

Blecher’s native South Africa was in President **Nelson Mandela**’s first term, its fledgling democracy freed at last from the scourge of apartheid. Looking around him, Blecher saw “aching poverty, but also the greatest and most valuable resource: human potential.”

Today, Monitor is bankrupt, and the once-hardened capitalist is a dedicated social entrepreneur, founder and executive leader of the **Community and Individual Devel-**

opment Association (CIDA), the parent organization for a series of ventures that provide disadvantaged South African youth with a first-class business education and a chance to transform their lives.

Like Blecher, thousands of talented women and men have chosen to put their strategic acumen and professional skills to work for a better world. To succeed, they think and go about building their ventures in a highly distinctive way. First, instead of conceiving of the disadvantaged populations they serve as beneficiaries, they see and enroll their constituents as *partners*. Second, they build for impact at scale. To achieve the magnitude of change they envision, they tap into and unleash the potential latent in their partners — arguably the most powerful force known to man: the ambition of human beings to achieve their dreams.

Derived from the Latin *ambitio*, ambition was originally

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a political term, used to describe the process of rounding up votes — which may account for its whiff of unseemliness. Even that sage of his time, the beneficent philosopher-ruler **Marcus Aurelius**, couldn't quite reconcile the attributes of virtue and vice inherent in the word. In one of his famed *Meditations*, he writes that, "a man's worth is no greater than the worth of his ambitions" while in another he contrasts the noble man's aspirations to the 'vulgarity' of one's ambitions.

A common use of the word is its sense of aim-directed action, a connotation borne out by its formal definition: according to the Oxford English Dictionary, ambition is the "ardent desire to rise to high position, or to *attain* (italics mine) rank, influence, distinction or other preferment."

Without ambition, I would argue, dreams risk remaining ethereal and untethered to reality. Ambition moves human beings from *wanting to improve their lives* to *taking the actions to do so*. Social entrepreneurs harness that force, creating ventures explicitly designed to help people help themselves. For the disadvantaged populations served by most social entrepreneurs, tangible goals — more income, good jobs, and the dignity that comes with improved social status — matter.

Over the decade leading to the new millennium, the **World Bank** carried out a massive research effort designed to understand poverty from the perspective of the poor themselves, interviewing more than 60,000 impoverished women and men from 60 countries for its landmark **Voices of the Poor** project. What was most important to them? Ways to provide for their families, enough to eat, healthcare, education, safety, and the dignity of self-determination. In other words, roughly half the world's population — the 2.5 billion women, men and children living on under \$2 a day — simply wants what the other half takes for granted.

It is this mega-force — the ambition of countless men and women claiming their right to better lives — that fuels social entrepreneurship, driving people like Taddy Blecher to challenge a status quo that they see as morally unjust, politically unwise, and economically counter-productive. For without education, how were South Africans to make the most of their liberation? Without a well-prepared workforce, how would the country's economy grow? Without an educated citizenry, how would its democracy thrive?

The revolutions continuing to play out in the Middle East show what can happen when a generation fed up with

oppression discovers its political power, taking to the streets to topple dictators. But the Arab Awakening is about more than regime change: at its heart lies *ambition*, for freedom and self-determination, along with the desire to secure a better future. In Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries, 65 per cent of the population is under the age of 30, and unemployment is endemic. The United States Development Program (UNDP) and League of Arab States predict the region will need to create 51 million jobs by 2020 in order to meet this burgeoning demand.

Absent economic and societal opportunity, ambition at this scale can lead to anger and continued unrest. Fostering the conditions for growth and stability requires institutional reform at every level, in government, education, and the economy. But such reforms don't just happen on their own: they require human disruptors, risk-takers who catalyze opportunity, those people we know as social entrepreneurs.

As **Roger Martin** and I argued in "Social Entrepreneurship: The Case for Definition" [*Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Spring 2007], social entrepreneurs see and seize opportunities to crack the code on systems that hold human potential in check, setting their sights not just on incremental improvements to a status quo, but on equilibrium change.

The 18th-century French economist **Jean Baptiste Say**, credited with coining the word 'entrepreneur', theorized in his *Treatise on Political Economy* that successful entrepreneurship "shifts economic resources out of an area of lower and into an area of higher productivity and yield." Social entrepreneurs are masters at harnessing human ambition for good: they understand that when the scaffold to opportunity is built, ambition will make the climb. Where others cannot see past the sheer scale and deeply entrenched nature of social problems, these individuals focus in on those same determinants: as they see it, the scale of the problem must be matched by the scale of the solution, and institutionalized inequity must be challenged by systemic reform. Following are a few compelling examples.

1. INJAZ AL-ARAB

This **Junior Achievement** affiliate, founded by **Soraya Salti** and based in Amman, Jordan, is tackling the challenge of Arab youth employment head-on. As was true for Blecher, Salti's starting point was a status quo that was wholly out of synch with reality: young people whose only vision for themselves was in securing civil sector employment;

a rapidly dwindling supply of such jobs; and neither understanding by nor opportunity for this burgeoning population to develop the skills required by business. Salti's answer was to align the interests of business with those of its future and clearly underprepared future workforce. Operating today in 14 MENA countries, the organization integrates business, entrepreneurship and financial literacy into the primary and secondary public educational curriculum.

Over the past ten years, 21,000 corporate volunteers have delivered INJAZ's hands-on learning in workforce readiness and entrepreneurship to more than 1,000,000 Arab youth. Hundreds have participated in the organization's Company Program, which encourages them to develop business ideas and then pitch them to local incubators.

Oday Amayrh of Jordan, age 24, credits INJAZ with the support he needed to build a successful online video content business, and INJAZ students were among the finalists in the first global social entrepreneurship competition held in Oslo in 2011. As for ambition, Salti speaks of Arab young people who "have created the impossible politically and now will create the impossible economically."

2. YOUTHBUILD

Appreciating the need to harness the creativity, vision and viewpoints specific to youth — in effect, to harness their ambition — doesn't only apply to MENA region youth. For **Dorothy Stoneman**, founder of the U.S.-based YouthBuild, this principle is fundamental. **YouthBuild** helps young people who have been ill-served by the U.S. educational system couple practical skills development with a course of academic study. By the time YouthBuild students graduate, they are qualified for employment in fields like construction and prepared to break free of poverty by making their ambitions reality. Currently, 273 YouthBuild programs across the U.S. serve 10,000 young adults annually, and the program is being replicated in 13 other countries.

3. COMMUNITY AND INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION (CIDA)

Taddy Blecher realized that South Africa would never achieve Mandela's vision when its institutions were designed to apartheid's specifications. Confronting a higher education system that shut out two-thirds of his country's population, he opted not just to open a new school, but to launch "the first free tertiary educational institutions in South Africa." And to translate his dream into reality, Blech-

er knew he had to capitalize on the human potential of those he served — that their partnership and their ambition was the key to mutual success.


Armed with his economist's training and business consulting experience, Blecher also accounted for the fact that his vision required a cost structure very different from that of South Africa's elite universities. And so he set out systematically to create a model that would be financially viable from the start and sustainable for the long haul. Instead of relying on traditional academics to fill out his faculty, he recruited practicing professionals from South African corporations, who then also became links to career opportunities for CIDA students. And instead of employing staff to manage and maintain campus facilities and infrastructure, Blecher's model initiated work-study requirements for all students. With training and supervision, CIDA students fill the institution's non-instructional jobs — janitorial, technical, and administrative. By design, Blecher didn't just enroll students or recruit faculty, he engaged and empowered them to become co-creators of a new institution.

4. BAREFOOT COLLEGE

At the Barefoot College, founded by **Bunker Roy** and based in Rajasthan, India, rural women and men of all ages — most of whom are either barely literate or completely illiterate, with no prospect for employment — are trained to become everything from dentists to teachers, mechanics to solar engineers and accountants. As Roy explains: "With a little guidance, encouragement and space to grow and exhibit their talent and abilities, people who have been written off by society are doing extraordinary things that defy description."

One of those extraordinary Barefoot College students is 32-year old **Rafea Anad**, whose story is told in a vivid new documentary by **Jehane Noujaim** for the globally-televised "*Why Poverty?*" series. The documentary traces the feisty Rafea's astonishing journey from the remote Bedouin village in Jordan where she lives in a tent and supports her family, to rural Tilonia — some 228 miles from Delhi, in Rajasthan, India.

There, she joins a class of students just like her — illiterate, determined, courageous older women from all over the world — in order to learn solar engineering. When asked by the filmmaker to explain her motivation, Rafea couldn't be more clear: she wants something better for her four daughters. "Is it not shameful," she asks, "that the youth of



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these girls is wasted without work?” It is ambition for herself and her children that drives Rafea to risk everything she knows, to stand up to her lout of a husband and entrust her children’s care to her own mother. When, upon returning home after mastering the arts of soldering circuit boards and wiring solar panels, Rafea successfully electrifies her simple home, she lights up with pride. More importantly, she has shown her children that they, too, can take control of their lives.

5. LANDESA

Tim Hansted is under no illusions as to the scale of global poverty. **Landesa**, the organization he leads, has done the math and carried out the analysis: of the estimated 2.47 billion barely scraping by on less than \$2 a day, three quarters live in rural areas and are dependent upon land they farm to survive. More than 1 billion of these subsistence farmers, however, are not in control of the land they cultivate, a condition that perpetuates their poverty and exacerbates their vulnerability. For families as for markets, uncertainty quashes ambition. Faced with the real possibility that their property can be seized or redistributed, farmers won’t risk investing even the tiny sums needed to diversify crops or increase yields. But with title comes security and with security a more stable foundation for development. For four decades, Landesa has partnered with governments throughout the world in order to secure land rights for the rural poor, knowing that title is catalytic, setting in motion a virtuous cycle of development.

Once families like **Lin Lianhua** and her husband **Su Yuan**, farmers in China’s Fujian province, gain ownership, Landesa knows they will invest the time and take the risks to make their land pay off. Under China’s system of communal ownership, the pair had toiled long and hard simply to eke out a paltry income from land worked collectively with other families. But once they’d secured title to their own five hectares, they decided to convert a section of the plot to bamboo, a plant that takes 3-4 years to mature but has the potential to pay off handsomely.

Today the family expects to net a profit of \$10,000 from its investment, proof that ownership seeds the incentive to succeed every bit as much as a new set of crops. With security, ambition surges; farmers who gain title to their

land will increase their productivity by 60 per cent, up their income by 150 per cent, double their investment in property improvements, send their children to school, and break free of poverty forever.

In closing

Ambition can seem invisible, but its energy is undeniable. To social entrepreneurs like those featured herein, no resource is as vital to prosperity as that of human potential. Throughout the world, the ambition of women and men seeking freedom, self-determination, and opportunity is gathering force.

Social entrepreneurs grasp the enormity of this momentum, appreciating the vast human potential underlying every data point on poverty, disease, environmental degradation and human suffering. They know that in the decades to come, this veritable tsunami of ambition will change countries, transform societies, and remake the world. **R**

Sally Osberg is President and CEO of The Skoll Foundation, which drives large-scale change by investing in, connecting and celebrating social entrepreneurs and the innovators who help them solve the world’s most pressing problems. She was named one of the ‘Millennium 100’ for her role in shaping and leading Silicon Valley. The Skoll Foundation was founded by University of Toronto graduate Jeffrey Skoll (BASc 87, HonLLD ‘03), one of the founders of eBay.