



# Learning From a New Wave of Social Entrepreneurs



Molly Wall

**W**hat can the mission movement learn from today's social entrepreneurs? How did Indian street children gain a voice in their community? Or African families confidently solve their own problems? And how must we be changed through reflection on the experiences and insights of "entrepreneurs in action," thinking harder and more broadly about the future and Kingdom advance, especially among unreached peoples?

## Case Study #1: A Voice for Children in India

Supper has ended, the sun gone down. Village children light kerosene lamps and set out for school. School? For most, the day held long hours of difficult labor, yet these classmates – child laborers and street kids in over 80 locations across rural Karnataka – are eager to assemble for study at their local village "Extension School."

Night schooling for child laborers is unexpected enough, but add the fact these students meet only two hours a day, manage themselves, select a teacher (an older student), participate in village politics, and still manage to sit for state-required exams, and you have the sort of work that can only be traced to the most innovative of social entrepreneurs.

**Long-term solutions will require wider and more innovative initiatives.**

In this case, his name is Damodaran Acharya (Damu), son of a Hindu priest whose own poverty-forced migration experience left him convinced that child laborers must somehow

be allowed an education, even though family poverty has driven them to work during school hours. (At that time, 40% of Karnataka's unregulated workforce was comprised of children.) Damu founded a society, The Concerned for Working Children, training

trainers to multiply the effort across the state and all of India.

*The New Idea:* Organize and empower young people to meet their own needs, and to address those of the community. Employ innovative educational methods and structures relevant and useful to students and families.

*The Strategy:* A trainer helps village children organize, listens to concerns and needs, and arranges discussion with village leadership. Once community problems are identified (considering the voice of the children), solutions (such as creating an "extension school") are implemented by the community.

*The Result:* Many of the state's child laborers are staying in or returning to school!

The alternative educational methods employed have been so successful that many government schools have adopted them. Some villages have seen a decrease in long-standing problems (such as alcoholism among adults) through student work efforts, and an increase in awareness of the power to address their own needs. Communities across the state have welcomed these marked improvements.

## Case Study #2: Power From the Ground Up in Zimbabwe

Alexander Chisango founded the Pan-African Family Empowerment Foundation in a daring attempt to address current social, physical, and spiritual problems of his native Zimbabwe. Chisango recognized that most development policies and programs are often based on Western social patterns (functioning as clusters of individuals) rather than African social patterns (functioning as clusters of families). So he enlisted individual families in the battle, using the community to support the effort.

His goal? If each family learns to solve its problems by working together (and is thereby strengthened),

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then perhaps the great challenges facing the country today will relent as healthy families emerge, participating in community and national affairs. Inspired by lessons from his own mother – who worked hard to address her family’s needs even as a peasant farmer widowed with eight children – this entrepreneur is seeking widespread change through a grassroots movement among families.

*The New Idea:* Empower and equip families to solve their own problems. Mobilize various sectors of the community (churches, non-governmental organizations, families, individuals) to network and contribute to this initiative in an effort to both change government policy and break a culture of dependence within communities.

*The Strategy:* The Foundation’s strategy is four-fold: 1) Train volunteers for family counseling – survey families to help them recognize existing resources and strengths (employment, skills, education, history, etc.), then provide counsel, 2) Help families start income-generating projects to keep funds benefiting families directly, 3) Conduct research – learn from those who have been through trials and hardship what kind of counsel and help is most relevant and useful, and 4) Lobby government for better policies that will benefit families first and foremost.

*The Result:* Given Zimbabwe’s large Christian population, Chisango has chosen to work primarily through churches to advance this initiative. More than 15 churches in Zimbabwe (and others in South Africa) now have family empowerment divisions, and more than 4000 families have been directly helped by the Foundation’s effort. Changes have surfaced within communities where families once hesitant have begun to care for their own relatives infected with HIV-AIDS. Demonstration of love between family members has notably increased.

## What Can We Learn From These Examples?

Five principles emerge with direct application for the rapid spread of God’s Kingdom.

1) *Without openness to new paradigms, change would not have occurred.* Are we willing to relinquish what we know “must” be true in order to see what God might desire to do instead? Are we willing to examine a situation and dream of new systems never attempted, or will we cling to existing forms and institutions, forcing present-day realities into potentially outdated structures?

2) *Without the participation of the civil sector, change would not have occurred.* We will do well to recognize this emerging force of civil societies worldwide, learning to encourage, partner, and contribute through the powerful vehicle of quality NGOs.

3) *Communities were mobilized to identify and address their own root needs.* Are we willing to find and work through existing leaders or social sectors? Even those less educated, “qualified,” or seemingly able to contribute? Are we willing for projects to be led by those not yet following Jesus? Are we equipped to facilitate communities taking action and defeating their own root problems rather than setting up and running civil societies run by “us” to help “them”? (Note that both organizations founded by these entrepreneurs serve not to directly address their targeted need; rather, they motivate, connect, and mobilize other government, private, or civil sectors to help address needs.)

4) *Solutions sought to keep existing familial and community networks intact, utilizing these networks to bring reform.* In neither case do we find these entrepreneurs removing those who are hurting and in need from their own network or transferring them into foreign structures or solution paradigms. Rather, both sought solutions to unique problems by recognizing that natural networks must remain as conduits for the flow of innovation. So how can we redirect our efforts such that the preservation of the family and extended networks holds sway over the structures we are inclined to introduce? The existing network is by far the most natural channel along which the gospel can rapidly spread!

5) *Effective entrepreneurs work for systemic change, not just situational change.* Address root problems – not just symptoms. Entrepreneurs realize some problems could be addressed for years and bring temporary relief, yet never provide long-term betterment to those in need. If solutions merely scratch the surface of a problem, root problems remain unaddressed. In both these examples, specific problems were identified as related to system-wide problems and addressed accordingly. Are we willing to step back and recognize that long-term solutions will require wider and more innovative initiatives?

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## Social Entrepreneurs and the Kingdom of God

At the root of systemic problems is the need for worldview transformation, without which even systemic change will ultimately fall short of bringing life, peace, and truth. But what might we learn from those experiencing notable success with social movements that give life to those in need? Let’s ask God for new paradigms of involvement worthy of His Kingdom. It seems clear that if the Kingdom is to spread rapidly, it must do so along existing and natural lines of relationship. How can we tap into and

strengthen these networks through development work that defeats evil, restores communities and spreads the good news of Jesus Christ?

To learn more about these two case studies, or to read about other social entrepreneurs worldwide, see [www.changemakers.net](http://www.changemakers.net). Both men featured in this article are Ashoka fellows (see [www.ashoka.org](http://www.ashoka.org)). 

# insider movement

## Missions in the 21st Century: Working With Social Entrepreneurs?

Rebecca Lewis

The challenge is this: how to catalyze an “insider movement” to Christ in a society closed to traditional mission work? For this to happen, the gospel needs to spread through pre-existing social networks, which become the “church.” People should not be drawn out of their families or communities into new social structures in order to become believers. God seems to be opening a new avenue of opportunity into closed societies through working with community agents of change – entrepreneurs working for social reform.

Historically, the most successful model for achieving lasting social change has been neither government nor business but the voluntary society (also known as the “citizen sector” or “civil society”). The idea of citizens banding together to reform society took a great step forward during the Evangelical Awakening, initiated by John Wesley in the 18th century. Out of this revival, and the Second Great Awakening in the early 19th century, came hundreds of voluntary, cross-denominational associations or “societies.” Founded by visionary social entrepreneurs, each society attacked a certain issue, everything from abolishing slavery to creating special “Sunday schools” to teach reading to children who worked all week. Why not harness this successful model as a vehicle for advancing God’s purposes among today’s least-reached people groups?

Today the door is wide open in most countries to people who would catalyze grass-roots initiatives to address social problems. During the 1990s the number of international non-profit organizations jumped from 6000 to 26,000, a growth rate of over 400%. Likewise, hundreds of thousands of national NGOs (non-government organizations) have been formed in non-Western countries. Why the sudden growth? First, since the fall of the Soviet Union, many governments have been releasing control of the economy and nurturing the private sector. Second, social entrepreneurs and the civil society sector are now widely recognized

for their success in solving formerly intractable problems.

Third, governments are increasingly embarrassed if they try to block non-profit initiatives, because a global value for “empathy” has been established by the rapidly-spreading evangelical movement and the incorporation of Christian values in secular education worldwide. Fourth, there is a new openness to change in general. As people in remote places have become exposed to the rest of the world through mass media, they are reconsidering their behavior patterns and traditional beliefs. People everywhere are putting their hope in education and valuing progress as never before. As a result, local communities, as well as national governments, are getting behind citizen organizations seeking to implement solutions to systemic problems.

If the goal is to produce insider movements to Christ, why work with social entrepreneurs? Christian workers can build extensive relationships with leaders and families within a community by assisting social entrepreneurs (whether they are believers or not) with their vision to attack a problem. These types of broad relational networks – proactively bringing change to the community – form an excellent basis for the spread of the gospel in a way that leads to insider movements. Through helping the civil sector, workers have a role that is understandable and beneficial both in the eyes of the local people and the government. Also, like Jesus, they can announce the Kingdom in the context of bringing healing to the community.

To those who would like to learn more about finding and assisting social entrepreneurs, I recommend David Bornstein’s fascinating book, *How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas* (Oxford University Press, 2003). 

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