



Social entrepreneurship in India: going beyond the symptoms

If social entrepreneurs in India focus on causes when mapping out challenges, rather than just fixing the symptoms, half the battle is already fought, says Rathin Roy, chairman of the board of directors of Rural Innovations Network, a Chennai-based company that helps social entrepreneurs incubate innovations and take them to the market to benefit the rural poor.

Because social entrepreneurs often face scenarios which are unpredictable and constantly changing, they have little time to work out what might be of use to them. They would perhaps just hope for the best or perhaps learn by trial-and-error, which takes time.

He says that although there are plenty of opportunities in India's social sector, most social entrepreneurs focus on traditional areas such as education and healthcare. This means there are "many challenges out there that are a lot harder to address," Roy told INSEAD Knowledge on the sidelines of the recent International Social Entrepreneurship Conference here.

Know the users



The first thing about mapping out a challenge is to go out and look at 'user

experience': not how the beneficiaries achieve their ends with the new technology or product, but how the user does it now without the innovation.

Sometimes learning about user experience comes in embarrassingly irritating ways, says Roy, who advises on strategic thinking and works in the areas of sustainable livelihoods and natural resources management. He recalls the time when he was at the Indian Institute of Management two decades ago and was asked to find out why people were not using the newly-invented smokeless chula, a brick stove which normally emits smoke when used.

As it turned out, people were not using the new type of chula because it didn't emit smoke. 'We like it to smoke when it should, and not to smoke when it shouldn't', was the reply. The smoke helped to keep down insect infestation in the thatched roofs of their huts.

When Roy took this piece of information back to the engineers, he found that all it required was a tin sheet costing one rupee to cut off the air flow to the chula and so make it smoke due to incomplete combustion. Remove the tin sheet and it doesn't smoke.

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When asked why then didn't they do it, the engineers said nobody asked them to.

"When you feel you are an expert, you sincerely believe that you know what the problem is. And you never bother to ask the user what they do, what they feel about what they are doing, why they do what they do and how they do it. This becomes particularly dangerous when you grapple with a problem," he argues.

The user experience concept is based partly on carrying out interviews to understand how others see the issue and partly direct observation. When someone comes up with an idea, he needs to put the user experience on top visually and then see whether what he is proposing helps the user, says Roy. "It's a visual exercise that's extremely powerful."

Thinking it through and adapting

The social entrepreneur often works in complex and uncertain situations which are impossible to control even though we may try to plan things to the last dot.

"When it doesn't work, you have to nudge the system. Play with it to make sure that some of those opportunities that are there in complexity can be utilised," says Roy. "Learn and adapt as you go along and approach the problem of management in real time instead of waiting for the result, which might then be too late to learn and adapt."

Evaluating as you go along

When social entrepreneurs bring in investors, these will require progress to be measured through evaluation. Traditionally one looks at performance in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. That works well in stable systems and with stable technology. However, if the systems are continuously evolving, a completely different approach is necessary.

"Because the nature of the beast is different, you might actually be doing harm by evaluating someone's system the traditional way," says Roy. "Nowadays, we ask the evaluator to join the management team and go with them through evaluative thinking where they are testing their assumptions and learning from how the system responds as they are progressing."

That's easy to say but difficult to do, he says. The difficulty is not knowing what to look for. Take the recent terror attacks in Mumbai and the post-event analysis that is going on. Many pieces of information that emerged several months before the incidents were ignored or not put into perspective because people weren't looking for them and they didn't make sense.

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"So look for the unusual rather than the usual. Learn to read the signs, be sensitive, and catch the feedback so you can improve the activity you are involved in and its impact even while it is going on, rather than reach the end and say why you either succeeded or failed," he says. "Try to understand the underlying forces that are playing out, and understand the 'plausible' futures and then see whether your strategy is robust enough to address them."

Once these three areas are pinned down, the social entrepreneur is on his way to dealing with complexity and change, Roy says. It doesn't make life easier, but at least it will be doable. He calls it the 'art of the possible.'

Rathin Roy was a plenary speaker at the International Social Entrepreneurship Conference held recently in Chennai, India.

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