

Civic Entrepreneurship: In Search of Sustainable Development

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Around the world, civic entrepreneurs are practising sustainable development through their actions. Representing civil society, business, and government, civic entrepreneurs are championing sustainable development and succeeding – often despite significant odds – in making it happen on the ground. It may often happen at a small scale, but it does so in undeniably real, robust and promising terms. Civic entrepreneurship is driven explicitly by the public interest, and seeks to create new ways of building social capital and of harnessing existing ideas, methods, inventions, technologies, resources or management systems in the service of collective goals.

Sustainable development is an organic process which, although driven by its own inner logic, requires the investment of human will and agency both by individuals and through the broader social environment: it requires the civic entrepreneur. Civic entrepreneurs – whether they come from NGOs, governments or the business sector – are needed to nurture and unleash the potential of sustainability.

If sustainable development is such a nuanced and variable process, how do we recognise it? If we can recognise it, how do we make it happen? And if we can see what needs to be done, how can those who would like to help best support the process?

Recognising sustainable development

Sustainable development can be identified by its ‘rootedness’ in the local context, a condition characterised by seven ‘identifying marks’. Common to virtually every successful experience of sustainable development is a rootedness in and responsiveness to the unique **priorities of the community**. In most examples, the coping and adaptive capacities of the community were improved and **sustainable livelihoods** were nurtured. Time and again, the community was centrally engaged in the development of strategies for the **wise use of resources**.

In many cases, a question driving the work was how could greater **ecological integrity** benefit the livelihoods of the communities in that particular ecosystem?

KEY CHALLENGE:

- Perhaps the most challenging lesson of the decade since the Rio Earth Summit has been that sustainable development has no blueprint: it cannot be deconstructed and replicated at will, a reality that has confounded governments, market forces and academia alike. Instead, it always involves newness: a new way of pulling things together, new ways of mobilising resources, building legitimacy, engendering collective action, stimulating economic activity or adapting technology. In short, it involves **entrepreneurship, or to be more exact civic entrepreneurship**.

The role and impact of civic entrepreneurship in sustainable development was brought most clearly to light during the lead up to the World Summit on Sustainable Development, through a unique inquiry, carried out at the behest of the United Nations Environment Programme. An initiative of the Ring (Regional and International Networking Group) of Sustainable Development Organisations (www.ring-alliance.org), coordinated by the Stockholm Environment Institute – Boston Center, this project brought together more than 350 individuals from more than 70 countries to identify successful examples of sustainable development in practice, to explain the nature of this success, and to outline what one could learn from these examples about the future of sustainable development. The resulting compilation of hundreds of stories and in-depth case studies is captured in the seven-volume book series, *Civic Entrepreneurship* (Banuri, Najam and Odeh, eds, 2002).

In the mid-1990s, responding to the rapid deterioration of Bangladesh's *Chanda Beel* wetland ecosystem, the Bangladesh Center for Advanced Studies (BCAS) launched a process for devising a people's participatory wetland management plan. The key challenge was to get all stakeholders in the *Chanda Beel* ecosystem to understand the interests of their fellow stakeholders and to arrive at the realisation that the long-term interests of each stakeholder would be served only if the interests of all were met. Consensus was built, not from a set of tradeoffs between different stakeholders, but from the integration of interests. Ultimately, a process of intense dialogue resulted in consensus on such issues as fish conservation, banning of harmful fishing gear, and restrictions on harmful practices. BCAS succeeded in the *Chanda Beel* because it employed a number of the strategies commonly used by civic entrepreneurs. It invested in institutions and communication, which in turn provided a platform for dialogue and consensus-building among previously opposed stakeholders. It offered stakeholders an enabling environment in which their concerns were recognised and integrated into the resulting plan. Finally, BCAS invested in its own key people and in the vision they brought to characterising and solving *Chanda Beel's* intractable problems.

Invariably, the solutions that worked best were tailored to the communities from whence they came; those that also worked in new settings possessed characteristics of **adaptability** that enabled them to be effectively scaled out, rather than simply mass produced. Consistently, successful cases exhibit a conscious and concerted effort to ensure not only that the desired change will happen, but also that it will persist – the identifying mark of **durability**.

Lastly, sustainable development experience reliably involves the realisation and fostering of **connectedness**; the realisation by all parties that their connection to the source of their sustenance and livelihoods is more than just a financial transaction – livelihoods and communities thrive best when all the connected elements are also thriving.

Willing sustainable development

The experience of civic entrepreneurs from across the world suggests that seven types of investment yield particularly high sustainable development dividends. Behind every sustainable development success story was a person with an idea; often the most important determinant of a success is the personal history, philosophy and character of the champion of that experience. Our lesson? **Invest in people**. In looking for the person with the idea, experience shows

that what matters most is not the newness of the idea but the vision through which the idea will be implemented: **invest in innovation**. In other words, the pursuit of sustainable development requires innovation in the 'how' rather than the 'what'. Consistently, where innovations succeeded in changing the way things were done, they did so by creating institutions – processes that extended the life of the activity beyond the individual: **invest in institutions**.

The practice of sustainable development involves tuning in to the unique dynamic of the situation at hand, listening, learning, and only then responding; it is not about designing a process, but about sustaining a dialogue: **invest in communication**. Good communications and strong partnerships – bridges across various divisions that crisscross the social domain (disciplines, agendas, interest groups, income groups, political groups, genders) – are critical to sustaining the institutions that in turn sustain successful experiences: **invest in partnerships**.

Sustainable development empowers and enables people to become partners in the decision-making that defines their livelihoods, and in doing so it creates fertile conditions for the emergence of civil will and civic entrepreneurship: **invest in an enabling environment**. All sustainable development successes involve a degree of imitation. Not in the sense of mindless replication, but the adaptation of an idea to one's own context and situation: **invest in imitation**. These are all investments in the *process* of sustainable development. Individually, and in combination, they seek to create conditions that promote entrepreneurship and unleash civil will, thus creating spaces where civic entrepreneurship can flourish.

So if you are a donor, invest in a person – not just any person, but a person with an idea. If you are a person with an idea, invest in institutions so that your work will last; and this means, among other things, invest in communications and partnerships. If you are a government policymaker, invest in supporting structures that enable the civic entrepreneurs to realise their ideas and build and strengthen institutions. If you are an academic, describe, analyse, chronicle, and catalogue experience in such a way as to enable people to imitate. Finally, whoever you are, imitate! All the great champions of sustainable development succeed by borrowing unabashedly from others.

Realising sustainable development

Through their stories, civic entrepreneurs invite us to rethink that which we think we know about sustainable development: we must **listen, learn, and propagate**. Ultimately, however, the storyteller is as important as the story in spreading the word. One must, therefore, invest in the storytellers themselves too. Finally, like venture capitalists to sustainable development, we **nurture**. Between them, these four areas must define the post-Johannesburg agenda for investing in sustainable development. ●

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