

What Is a Social Entrepreneur?

Entrepreneurs are essential drivers of innovation and progress. In the business world, they act as engines of growth, harnessing opportunity and innovation to fuel economic advancement. Social entrepreneurs act similarly, tapping inspiration and creativity, courage and fortitude, to seize opportunities that challenge and forever change established, but fundamentally inequitable systems.

Distinct from a business entrepreneur who sees value in the creation of new markets, the social entrepreneur aims for value in the form of transformational change that will benefit disadvantaged communities and, ultimately, society at large. Social entrepreneurs pioneer innovative and systemic approaches for meeting the needs of the marginalized, the disadvantaged and the disenfranchised – populations that lack the financial means or political clout to achieve lasting benefit on their own.

Throughout history, such individuals have introduced solutions to seemingly intractable social problems, fundamentally improving the lives of countless individuals by changing the way critical systems operate. Florence Nightingale and Maria Montessori offer two prominent historical examples. Muhammad Yunus, recipient of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize, is a more recent example. He began offering microloans to impoverished people in Bangladesh in 1976, thereby empowering them to become economically self-sufficient and proving the microcredit model that has now been replicated around the world.

While social entrepreneurship isn't a new concept, it has gained renewed currency in a world characterized by a growing divide between the haves and the have-nots. With this heightened visibility, social entrepreneurs at the forefront of the movement are distinguishing themselves from other social venture players in terms of ultimate impact.

One example is social entrepreneur Bunker Roy, who created the Barefoot College in rural communities in India to train illiterate and semiliterate men and women, whose lack of educational qualifications keeps them mired in poverty. Today Barefoot College graduates include teachers, health workers and architects who are improving communities across India, including 450 "barefoot" engineers who have installed and maintain solar-electrification systems in 547 villages that reach nearly 100,000 people.

Another example is Ann Cotton, who started the Campaign for Female Education (CAMFED) in 1993 to achieve the simple goal of ensuring an education for young girls in Africa whose families cannot afford school fees. By

establishing a sustainable model that provides community support for girls to go to school, start businesses and return to their communities as leaders, CAMFED has broken the cycle of poverty for hundreds of thousands of young women in Zimbabwe, Ghana, Zambia and Tanzania. In 2006 alone, more than 300,000 children benefited from education programs supported by a network of more than 5,100 young women who have themselves benefited from CAMFED-supported education and microfinance programs.

These and other social entrepreneurs are solution-minded pragmatists who are not afraid to tackle some of the world's biggest problems. They recognize the extraordinary potential in the billions of poor people who inhabit the planet, and they are absolutely committed to helping them use their talents and abilities to achieve their potential. Social entrepreneurs use inspiration, creativity, courage, fortitude and, most importantly, direct action, to create a new reality – a new equilibrium – that results in enduring social benefit and a better future for everyone.