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Introduction

Jeffrey A. Robinson, Johanna Mair and Kai Hockerts

The International Social Entrepreneurship Research Conferences

In our previous volume we described social entrepreneurship as:

a wide range of activities: enterprising individuals devoted to making a difference; social purpose business ventures dedicated to adding for-profit motivations to the nonprofit sector; new types of philanthropists supporting venture capital-like ‘investment’ portfolios; and nonprofit organizations reinventing themselves by drawing on lessons learned from the business world. (Mair *et al.* 2006:1)

Since we wrote those words we have been impressed by the rise of activities and the creation of infrastructure around the phenomenon of social entrepreneurship. As an area of research, however, social entrepreneurship is in its infancy. Since 2004, when we were just beginning our collaboration, there have been a large number of events have been organized bringing together disparate audiences interested in the topic. However, during this same time period, there were virtually no opportunities for scholars to gather and discuss papers, themes and concepts relating specifically to the study of social entrepreneurship.

When we launched the series of conferences related to the study of social entrepreneurship in 2005 at IESE in Barcelona, it was not clear what our efforts would lead to. We hoped to move the research forward and to help foster collaboration amongst a group of scholars with common interest. By the time we held our second International Social Entrepreneurship Research Conference (ISERC) at New York University’s Stern School of Business, it was clear to us that a community of scholars around this topic had emerged. The level of dialogue had improved.

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The variety of perspectives representative had increased. The amount of resources targeted at such research efforts had increased.

With such an array of activity, it should come as no surprise that other conferences have been founded and that social entrepreneurship tracks have been established at leading academic conferences. The research of social entrepreneurship is a part of a vibrant international discussion on how society and business will co-exist. The efforts of the Skoll Centre at Oxford's Said Business School, and regional networks such as the EMES European Research Network and Social Enterprise Knowledge Network (SEKN) are testaments to the dynamism of this discussion. This is a conversation we gladly join.

In this volume

In this volume we have brought together scholars from the around the world who write about the phenomenon and the theories of social entrepreneurship. We have organized this book along three dimensions: phenomenon-based research that draws upon existing theories, works that attempt to extend existing theories and regional perspectives. We discuss each below.

Phenomenon-based research

In the first section, Part I, entitled 'Identifying Actors and Measuring Performance and Sustainability of Social Entrepreneurial Ventures', we take a look at the phenomenon of social entrepreneurship from three approaches. The three chapters address the phenomenon using social-psychology, institutional theory, and sociology. At the 2006 ISERC conference, these papers represented an approach to theory building that begins by exploring some facet of the phenomenon of social entrepreneurship. For example, Simms and Robinson consider the experiences and background of the social entrepreneurs themselves and demonstrate how identity theory has relevance for predicting strategic and organizational decisions. The chapters written by Nicholls and Sharir use a similar research strategy to understand the implications of legitimacy and survivability. This approach moves the research in this area forward by demonstrating how existing theories of organizations can be used to explain what we see in the field.

New directions for existing theories

In Part II of this book, entitled 'Extending Theory,' we explore new directions for existing theories of organizations. At the conference, these

papers presented new directions for existing theories. For example, in the chapter written by Krueger, Kickul, Gundry, Verman and Wilson, the entrepreneurial intentions literature is challenged to include social dimensions of the opportunities described when using discrete choice modeling or other methods. Mair and Marti see the need to develop the concept of institutional voids as an extension of institutional theory. Haugh sees new dimensions of the resource-based view of the firm in social entrepreneurship. Using this approach to studying social entrepreneurship, we see how existing theories can be improved when we consider social entrepreneurship. This moves the field forward by demonstrating how these organizations force our existing theories into new directions.

Global points-of-view

In the final part of this book, Part III, entitled 'Regional Perspectives,' we present three chapters that explore the social entrepreneurship phenomenon in Asia, Spain and Latin America and the Middle East. What we find from these three chapters is that context matters. Social entrepreneurship unfolds in different places with local flourish. At the conference, these papers represented some of the most interesting work because they painted a fuller picture of how the phenomenon is experienced in their home nations, its origins, and strategies. This approach yields a more flavorful version of what constitute social entrepreneurship.

Moving social entrepreneurship research forward

In this edited volume, it was a our goal to move the conversation beyond the discussion of definitions toward a discussion of constructs, concepts, frameworks and theories of social entrepreneurship. We do not prescribe to the notion that there is one meta-theory of social entrepreneurship but that there many theories that explain and frame the activities of social entrepreneurs. This approach has led us to conclude that social entrepreneurship research must avoid four pitfalls as we move forward.

First, we can not remain marginalized in our schools, conferences and academic conversations. This pitfall is avoided by making sure that we connect our work to broader currents in our fields, a discipline or society. In some universities, the topic of social entrepreneurship is marginalized because scholars have not demonstrated how the phenomenon relates to interesting societal trends or run counter to existing theories of organization, social change, and economic development.

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By connecting our work to these other areas, our research becomes more important to our schools, more valuable to practitioners and more relevant to society.

Secondly, we can not become an exclusive group of researchers that does not welcome others into the conversation. If we have closed conversations that do not allow for others to contribute, we risk alienating the very people who will rescue it from stagnancy. We will need to engage scholars across disciplines and across the globe to maintain the vibrancy of the discussion. We hope that social entrepreneurship research would become the exemplar of how to integrate academics and practitioners in to a discussion that yields new directions in research and theory.

Thirdly, this can not be strictly a northern hemisphere conversation. If the conversation only takes place between the US, Europe and those nations aligned with them, we will be lacking some of the many facets of social entrepreneurship that make it a phenomenon worthy of study. We fully acknowledge the contextual differences (social structure, institutions, culture) between the north and south. We have taken direct aim at this in this volume by highlighting regional perspectives beyond the US and Europe. But, we have not been successful in bringing papers from south Asia, South America and Africa or about these areas into our conversation. So, we must take the conversation to them. The result will be a richer discussion about the nature of social change and economic development.

Finally, we can not be a research area that disintegrates into warring factions. While we certainly want have a robust dialogue about the theory and practice of social entrepreneurship, it is not helpful to divide into camps that wage war across the pages of journals and books. This does not mean we will agree with the points of view of others but at the very least we will agree that their point of view is no less valid than our own. Part of this is achieved by having outlets for discussion and debate – on-line and via conference. With the formation of the University Network for Social Entrepreneurship a website was established to link researchers and practitioners to one another throughout the world.

In conclusion, we envision a point in the near future when the legitimacy of social entrepreneurship research is not challenged by the mainstream. How will we know we have ‘made it’ to that point in time? One indicator would be the places where social entrepreneurship research is published. Not only do we expect there to be conference papers and edit volumes such the one you are reading. We also expect to see solo-authored books that look at the phenomenon from an academic perspective and journal publications that present the development of

this research area. With the establishment of specialized entrepreneurship research journals (such as *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal*) and the establishment of the first academic journal specifically about this topic (*Social Enterprise Journal*), this reality seems closer than ever before. The final hurdles will be papers on these topics published well within the mainstream of various disciplines. While our work has focused on the fields of management and entrepreneurship, there is much to be offered by the disciplines of economics, sociology, psychology, history, anthropology, and other social sciences. This list of activities would certainly point us in the right direction for establishing a robust domain for researching of social entrepreneurship. It is clear to us, as we write this introduction, that significant progress has been made in establishing this research area. We look forward to working with others to shape its future.

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