

## Standing the Poor World on its Head

*Innovations Case Discussion:  
Barefoot College of Tilonia*

When someone like Bunker Roy has helped pioneer and define a global movement, inspiring successive generations of wildly innovative social entrepreneurs, it is tempting to heap further laurels upon his head. Others, less generous in spirit, might be tempted to seek out his Achilles Heel. But with the world headed towards a population of nine billion-plus sometime mid-century, perhaps there is a higher task. Perhaps we should try to dig a little deeper into the question: For all its wonders, does Barefoot College provide a model that is sustainable, replicable and scalable?

Roy and his co-author Jesse Hartigan have done us all a great service with their presentation of the Barefoot approach, but our aim in what follows is to reframe the achievements of what the more brand-savvy might call “The Barefoot Way.”<sup>1</sup> For, much as we may love the Barefoot Way and community, the reptilian part of the brain keeps nagging away, asking whether there is not something about all of this that is more like a set of locally reported modern miracles, together with an accompanying spray of parables, rather than a global revolution in the making.

And why is this important? Well, given the sheer scale and intransigence of global poverty, it seems inevitable that there will be a growing number of calls to turn the current development system on its head, to let the poor find their own way. Handing over responsibility for the future to the poor would provide a very useful alibi for some to do nothing—or, worse, to continue with forms of business-as-usual that undermine the world of the grindingly poor. In this scenario, the Barefoot parables could be used to reinforce strategies that were about as remote from the Barefoot principles as could be imagined—rather like what happened with the crusading Christian Church in the Middle Ages.

Not that we are looking for revolution. History shows that such social convulsions rarely produce the sort of sustained changes their instigators hoped they would. Indeed, many of these people end up under the guillotine or with their backs to pock-marked walls. Instead, accelerated evolution should be our goal. And here is a public health warning: while we aim to be analytical about the processes of—and trends in—social entrepreneurship, we often find ourselves

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As consummate marketers, these people typically confront us with stark contrasts. They do it willfully, to catch our attention—and very often it works. So, the Roy/Hartigan case argues, the work of big donors and Western-conditioned experts has been patronizing, top down, insensitive and expensive, disempowering the marginalized, the exploited, and the very poor. All true, up to a point, though very often the failures of development have had at least as much to do with the endemic corruption and inefficiency that is the hallmark of many less developed nations and regions.

At first glance, at least as viewed through the Bunker Roy kaleidoscope, the world seems to be a place of intense whites and profound blacks. Big (as in Big Business or Big Government) is bad, small—in all its infinite variety—is beautiful. Fritz Schumacher lives. And, certainly, there are deep, uncomfortable truths here. But the world is a very much more complex place than most propagandists would have us believe. Western aid and

development efforts may have been deeply flawed, but they are neither uniformly bad nor beyond remedy, given sufficient political will on the part of both donor and beneficiary countries. Think of the story of Robert McNamara, then of the World Bank, coming and sleeping on the floors of Tilonia in his quest for understanding. These are not Nazis; they are often intelligent, committed, worried people desperately trying to work out how to drive political, economic, and social change.

Equally, big corporations may operate from sets of values that can seem completely alien to ordinary people, but many have played a central role in the development of what are now better-organized, better-governed parts of the world. Interestingly, when we did our first survey of social entrepreneurs as part of our three-year research program funded by the Skoll Foundation (refer to the Reasons to be Hopeful text box), we found that the world's leading social and environmental entrepreneurs are hugely interested in finding ways to work with mainstream companies. Some, like Muhammad Yunus of Grameen, are already developing fascinating partnerships with companies like Danone, but most are not—and are only too ready to declare that they don't yet know how.

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## Reasons to be Hopeful

The early findings of SustainAbility's Skoll Foundation funded work on social entrepreneurship are encouraging, to a degree. First, it is clear that there has been an extraordinary proliferation—and growth—of networks devoted to the replication and scaling of entrepreneurial models, among them: Acumen, Ashoka, Echoing Green, Endeavor, The Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship, and The Skoll Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship.

When we did our first survey as part of this program of work, we quizzed over 100 leading social and environmental entrepreneurs around the world. The key findings of the resulting report, "Growing Opportunity", included the fact that these entrepreneurs—unlike many NGOs—have an overwhelming appetite to work with mainstream business. The main problem is that they say they do not know how to select appropriate partners, nor do they know how to negotiate appropriate relationships. But such challenges are fairly readily addressed.

In our second survey, we set out to address a problem that surfaced when we circulated SustainAbility's corporate clients to say that we were extending our work into the field of social entrepreneurship. A handful—but we pay attention to weak signals—said, in so many words, that they were sorry to be losing us as we headed off into the outer darkness. For them, it seemed, working with NGOs was now part of business-as-semi-usual (fitting neatly into the corporate citizenship and risk management boxes), whereas working with entrepreneurs exploring new markets and developing new business models somehow didn't fit.

This blind spot was our target in our second survey, which produced a final

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Ultimately, whatever individual social entrepreneurs may insist to their donors or other stakeholders, there is no single entrepreneurial solution to the world's social and environmental challenges. Instead, we urgently need much more entrepreneurial thinking and approaches right across the spectrum of human activity, from bottom to top, small to big, citizen sector to public and private sectors. We are tempted to quote Mao Tse-Tung's line that it's time to let a thousand flowers bloom. But while Mao would then hack down the tallest blooms, the citizen, public and private sectors alike all need to develop the skills of entrepreneurial incubation, replication, and scaling.

Perhaps Barefoot College's biggest contribution to the global debate will be in the form of a demonstration project. Every so often, someone does something extraordinary, like the people who achieved heavier-than-air flight, broke the four-minute-mile barrier or the sound barrier, sailed solo around the world, or landed on the moon—and suddenly the impossible seems entirely possible to the wider world. There is in the Barefoot Way something deeply significant for the twenty-first century, something that could be like a crucial new gene in a population under stress, something that could help some parts of our collective future to take on rather unexpected forms. A provocative conversation with Paul Hawken as we

report entitled *The Social Intrapreneur*. If *Growing Opportunity* focused on the world of social entrepreneurs like Muhammad Yunus of Grameen Bank or Bunker Roy of Barefoot College, this latest report focuses on what we might call the “Yunus Inside” phenomenon of social and environmental entrepreneurs (or intrapreneurs) working inside mainstream companies. The degree to which the social intrapreneurs surveyed welcomed the process was quite extraordinary: many, it turned out, feel quite isolated in terms of the challenges they face inside their companies or organizations.

The best—or most effective—of these people are adept at fighting and surviving cynicism, caution and the status quo inside their host organizations. They have found that they cannot turn their backs on the savage global inequities and environmental degradation that characterize the modern world. They believe in market solutions and are creating new business models. They are compelling their organizations to look outside their comfort zones—to see both the strategic risks and profound opportunities that exist beyond current business unit time horizons. They are not satisfied with suboptimal equilibriums, where markets work well for some, but not at all for others. They flourish where they are provided with—or can assemble—an effective base from which to leverage innovative societal solutions.

And many of them are quick to note that their personal vision and work owes much to the extraordinary achievements of people like Bunker Roy, Muhammad Yunus, and the other leading edge pioneers we profile in *The Power of Unreasonable People*.

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developed this commentary helped spur a line of thought in this direction, one which we will return to towards the end of the piece.

#### LEVERAGED NONPROFIT

So much for the teaser. More fundamentally, what sort of organizational life-form are we talking about here? And where do Bunker Roy and Barefoot College fit into the entrepreneurial spectrum? In our ongoing work on social entrepreneurship, we have focused on three main forms of social enterprise: Leveraged Nonprofit Ventures (Model 1), Hybrid Nonprofit Ventures (Model 2), and Social Business Ventures (Model 3)<sup>2</sup>.

With Model 1 enterprises, a public good is delivered to the most economically vulnerable, who do not have access to, or are unable to afford, the services rendered; there tends to be a high degree of dependence on various forms of philanthropy; there is often a central goal of enabling direct beneficiaries to assume ownership of the initiative; and frequently the founding entrepreneur morphs into a figurehead, in some cases for the wider movement, as the processes of succession work through.

Model 2 enterprises also serve the under- or un-served, but the notion of making (and reinvesting) a profit is not totally out of the question. The enterprise is able to recover a portion of its costs through the sale of goods and services, in the process often identifying (and in some cases helping to develop) new markets. The entrepreneurs here mobilize funds from public, private and/or philanthropic organizations in the form of grants, loans, or, in rarer cases, quasi-equity investments.

As mainstream investors and businesses enter the picture, even when they are not seeking mainstream financial returns, they tend to push hybrid nonprofit ventures to become Model 3 social business ventures, to ensure access to new sources of funding, particularly capital markets. Here the entrepreneur sets up the venture as a business with the specific mission to drive transformational social and/or

environmental change. He or she seeks out investors interested in combining financial and social returns. The enterprise's financing—and scaling—opportunities can be significantly greater because social business can more easily take on debt or equity.

All three pursue social or environmental ends that markets have largely or totally failed to address, and they use different means to do so. In the process, they may adopt unique leadership, management, and fund-raising styles, each with its own implications and lessons for people working in mainstream organisations in the citizen, public, and private sectors.

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Using this taxonomy, Barefoot College is a Model 1 venture. Ask most Model 1 entrepreneurs why they are now working on a for-profit basis, and they will look at you as if you are from another planet—which you just as well could be. These people aim to meet needs that are ignored by current market mechanisms and businesses. Maybe this blinds them to the occasional opportunity to operate on a for-profit basis, but generally they operate where the market air is too thin for mainstream businesses to even think of venturing.

The following characteristics tend to be typical of Model 1 enterprises:

- A public good is being delivered to the most economically vulnerable, who do not have access to, or are unable to afford, the service rendered.
- Both the entrepreneur and the organisation are change catalysts, with a central goal of enabling direct beneficiaries to assume ownership of the initiative, enhancing its long-term sustainability.
- Multiple external partners are actively involved in supporting (or are being

- recruited to support) the venture financially, politically, and in kind.
- The founding entrepreneur morphs into a figurehead, in some cases for a wider movement, as others assume responsibilities and leadership.

You could argue that entrepreneurs applying leveraged non-profit approaches are modern-day alchemists who, with minimal financing, leverage the power of communities to transform an otherwise grim daily existence. While they learn a lot from failures, as Roy and Hartigan note, the best of them are proving more successful than most alchemists, whose fumbling experiments heralded the dawn of the industrial era. In like manner, leading social entrepreneurs signal where some of tomorrow's largest market opportunities will be found—and, at least in outline, the sort of business models that will help turn those opportunities into social and market realities.

That said, companies—and other potential mainstream partners—should not be fooled into thinking that these entrepreneurs' dependence on external funds and in-kind support will make them easy partners. Quite the contrary. Many carry an understandable rage born from years of watching their communities being shortchanged, ignored, or destroyed by greed. Still, mainstream businesses that create successful partnerships with these enterprises will likely find their thinking challenged, their horizons stretched, and their own employees reinvigorated.

#### SEXY, BUT WILL IT SCALE?

Successful entrepreneurs—whatever their field—tend to spin a good story. Bunker Roy is no exception. One that we have long liked relates to the home-made puppets the Barefoot community has used to change the attitudes of many communities on issues such as child marriage, the rights of women, equal wages for women, and legal literacy. Roy loses few opportunities when speaking overseas to tell audiences that puppets were made from papier-mâché produced by recycling World Bank reports. True or not, the story sticks in the audience's memory—and with it the fundamental principle of people taking their destinies into their own hands.

The Barefoot USP is clear. Billed as the only college in India that follows the lifestyle and work style of Gandhi, it is also the only college built by the poor, for the poor, and managed, controlled, and owned by the poor. All very exciting, but that every lack of “competition” should give us pause—you know an organization is truly successful when you see competitors trying to emulate it. Given the role of competition in opening out markets, Barefoot College's very uniqueness signals deep-seated structural barriers in the “market.”

Again, while it is certainly fair to claim that Barefoot College is “a microcosm of a more just and creative world,” its survival and success has been very much due to the vision, energy, and stamina of one man, Bunker Roy. Without his enormous capacity to raise external resources, it would have been virtually impossible to fund some of Barefoot's current projects, including the process of hosting solar-engineers-in-training from other countries. This is particularly important because the College's efforts have catalyzed generation upon generation of trainees who return

to their rural communities in developing countries with the knowledge and skills needed to construct rainwater-harvesting tanks from local materials or to solar-electrify their villages.

But how scalable is all of this? The case underscores the fact that, to date, 20 colleges in the Barefoot mould have been established in 13 Indian states, all adhering to the same non-negotiable tenets. Later on in the story, we learn that more than 340 ordinary village women from eight countries have trained as Barefoot solar engineers—and that they have gone on to solar-electrify some 550 schools and 13,000 households in more than 600 villages around the world. There have also been significant parallel achievements in the area of rainwater harvesting in countries like Ethiopia. Again, the temptation is to applaud, to stamp the ground, and call for the beatification of such extraordinary people.

But it is as if we are watching the Wright Brothers wrestling their ungainly machines into the air at Kittyhawk, knowing that what they are doing is of mythic proportions and significance, but knowing too that between those epic small steps and the great leaps that took the aviation and aerospace industries to their current scales lie a huge amount of history, of technological and financial evolution, and of extraordinary adventures that help the small become Big. What is missing from the case—and we admit that this is not the authors' purpose—is any assessment of the shifts in thinking and behaviors in the citizen, public and private sectors that will turn the Barefoot Way into a basic tenet of twenty-first century politics, business, and financing.

## UNLEARNING

There is no doubt that Bunker Roy qualifies for our highest label of praise: he is a wildly unreasonable man. The title of the book—*The Power of Unreasonable People*—that summarizes our own thinking and work to date references something that playwright George Bernard Shaw once said. “The reasonable man adapts himself to the world,” he noted, whereas “the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself.” Therefore, Shaw concluded, “all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”

And one of the most strikingly unreasonable features of the Barefoot Way, at least as articulated by Roy, is the notion of unlearning. It may sound uncomfortably reminiscent of the “re-education” camps that so often followed in the wake of twentieth century revolutions, but the notion that much of what we took for granted—and that development professionals preached—in the last century is sufficiently flawed to require intense re-examination strikes us as eminently reasonable, indeed very much overdue. But there is a danger in all of this that acolytes end up so celebrating the practical wisdom of the poor that we cascade all the responsibility for their state—and for the arduous task of finding relevant solutions—to those at the bottom of the pyramid of wealth and power.

It is interesting that part of the role Bunker Roy has played is almost akin to that of Old-World prophets, channelling angels down from the heavens. So we

learn not only about McNamara making a flying visit, but also that Tilonia has seen an endless flow of international dignitaries—among them Prince Charles—who have helped put and keep Barefoot College on the political radar screen. And then there are the throw-away lines about people like architect-designer Buckminster Fuller, whose geodesic principles inform some of the most interesting Barefoot buildings. Clearly, this isn't a black-or-white world, but a chequered world, a world of intensely shaded greys, of combinations, of hybrid outcomes.

And the ability to survive and thrive in such zones of complexity, we have found, is a key characteristic of successful social entrepreneurs. When we tried to distill down some of the most crucial characteristics for the book, the following leaped out at us. Among other things, these entrepreneurs:

- Try to shrug off the constraints of ideology or discipline.
- Identify and apply practical solutions to social problems, combining innovation, resourcefulness, and opportunity.
- Focus—first and foremost—on social value creation and, in that spirit, are willing to share their innovations and insights for others to replicate.
- Jump in before they are fully resourced.
- Have an unwavering belief in everyone's innate capacity, often regardless of education, to contribute meaningfully to economic and social development.
- Show a dogged determination to take risks that others wouldn't dare assume.
- Balance their passion for change with a zeal to measure and monitor their impact.
- Display a healthy impatience (e.g. they don't do well in bureaucracies, which can raise succession issues as their organisations grow—and almost inevitably become more bureaucratic).
- Have a great deal to teach change-makers in other sectors.

### THE TRANSPARENCY GENE

Standing back from the Barefoot case, we are left with the question of whether all this can—and will—replicate and scale in a globally significant way. The answer has to be, up to a point. The fact is that even a 100-fold or 1,000-fold scaling of the current Barefoot College operations would only scratch the surface of India's challenges, let alone those of the rest of the world. But, mercifully, replication and scaling can happen in multiple ways.

In our first set of bulleted points above, outlining some of the characteristics of Model 1 social entrepreneurship, we noted that often the founding entrepreneur “morphs into a figurehead, in some cases for a wider movement.” That is precisely what Bunker Roy has done—and there are ways in which this process can catalyze change at very different levels. So, for us at least, this is all a bit like gene transfers. There is a set of Barefoot genes that could be adopted to good effect by a wide range of citizen, public, and private sector organizations, if only they knew the whys and hows.



The “Unlearning Gene” would certainly be one of these, as long as it is accompanied by assorted learning genes and related promoters, but maybe the most important element of the Barefoot Way—and one that even Bunker Roy would probably admit Barefoot has been singularly unsuccessful in spreading to the rest of India, at least as yet—is the “Transparency and Accountability Gene.” Given the way in which the lack of transparency and accountability promotes and protects corruption and inefficiency, finding mechanisms that let the sun shine in, that develop appropriate governance and stakeholder engagement mechanisms—built on but expanded from the basic Barefoot approach—could rival the “Stand-the-Poor-World-on-its-Head Gene” as the single greatest contribution that the Barefoot community could make to the wider world.

Like the early versions of major religions, the austerity element of the Barefoot Way may limit its spread, but just as new growth can spring through the forest floor after a fire sweeps through, so new genes, new social and market perspectives, and new business models can erupt into the market landscape after major discontinuities. And that is where the conversation with Paul Hawken, author of many fine books, most recently *Blessed Unrest*,<sup>3</sup> comes in.

He and John Elkington were talking about the prospects for a global economic meltdown, as the sort of natural-resource and environmental limits predicted by the *Limits to Growth* team in the early 1970s arrive on an accelerated time-scale, driven by a Perfect Storm of population growth, spreading consumerist lifestyles, and the onset of Peak Oil, Peak Water, Peak just-about-everything. Hawken countered Elkington’s pessimism about the capacity of solar and other relevant energy and environmental technologies to deploy fast enough to meet the emerging challenges by noting what had happened in the United States when it finally swung into World War II and ramped up its mighty engine of production. As Liberty Ships, aircraft carriers, cruisers, tanks and Jeeps poured off the production lines, he recalled, much of the work was done by people who had no previous experience of engineering or manufacturing: remember the inspirational ad campaigns around “Rosie the Riveter”<sup>4</sup>.

Perhaps as the pressures on our economies and societies intensify, with climate change helping turn up the heat in so many different senses, elements of the Barefoot model could be hybridised with elements of the cleantech revolution now sweeping the world.<sup>5</sup> The work of Bunker Roy and his colleagues at least allows us to live in hope.

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1. Jesse Hartigan worked at the Barefoot College, Tilonia, from April to August 2007; he is the son of Pamela Hartigan, who is both co-author of *The Power of Unreasonable People* with John Elkington and also a co-founder of Volans Ventures.
  2. See John Elkington and Pamela Hartigan, *The Power of Unreasonable People: How Social Entrepreneurs Create Markets That Change the World*, Harvard Business Press, 2008
  3. Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming*, Viking Press, 2007; see also <http://www.blessedunrest.com/>
  4. See <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosie\\_the\\_Riveter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosie_the_Riveter)>.
  5. See <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cleantech> and <http://www.cleantech.com/>>.