

**SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR:
DEFINITION AND DISCUSSION**

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1. Introduction

Global Greengrants Fund commissioned this study to explore the concept and definition of “social entrepreneurship,” determine whether a subset of its grantees might be social entrepreneurs, and create documents to explain social entrepreneurship to the Greengrants community. Greengrants recognizes that “there is no better investment than supporting passionate people with great ideas.” In a world of limited resources, Greengrants further realizes that any tools to better identify those people with the best ideas and greatest chance for long-term successes will be beneficial to its efforts.

Prior to beginning this research, Greengrants believed that

- The small grants that the organization provides “can stimulate the emergence of social entrepreneurship”
- The Greengrants community “nurtures the emergence of social entrepreneurship”
- A subset of the organization’s advisors and grantees are social entrepreneurs.¹

Even with this strong sense that Greengrants was already working with social entrepreneurs, the organization felt the need to more fully understand the concept of social entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurship in order to better serve its grantees and be more effective in its work. It also believed that while existing definitions are useful, they don’t fully capture the context in which Greengrants is using the term. Greengrants felt that it should create its own understanding of the concept, and because of the decentralized nature of the organization should include its advisors and coordinators, as well as staff, in the process.

This paper is one result of those efforts. It is meant to accompany a one page definition and description of social entrepreneur, and to provide additional discussion and ideas that could not be included in the short definition document. The main audience is Greengrants advisors, who will be considering the working definition developed here and determining how to apply the definition to their grant making.

2. Research methods

Developing a working definition of social entrepreneur was an iterative process that involved both internal and external resources, along with extensive review and discussion with Greengrants staff members. Sources of information include the following:

2.1 Literature review and interviews

In order to gain a better understanding of social entrepreneurship, this work included a review of relevant published reports and websites that explore social entrepreneur definitions and issues. Reviewed organizations and websites included Ashoka, Schwab Foundation, and Social Edge. Work by the following authors was examined: Gregory Dees, William Drayton, Michael Chertok, and David Bornstein. Based on this research, a full listing of suggested reading and other sources is provided in Appendix A.

In addition to reviews of published reports and websites, several interviews were conducted by phone or email in order to delve into some of the details of defining social entrepreneurship for Greengrants. Two sessions were of particular value: an email exchange with Greg Dees, Adjunct Professor of Social Entrepreneurship and Nonprofit Management at Duke University’s Fuqua

¹ Heather Ryan, Greengrants proposal to Skoll Foundation, May 2004.

School of Business, and a phone interview with Grant LaRouche, Director of Global Development at Ashoka.

2.2 Feedback from Greengrants coordinators and advisors

Reviewing external sources of social entrepreneur definitions and understanding was only the start of the process. Concurrent to the review of outside sources, a survey was created and distributed by email to Greengrants coordinators and advisors around the world, with a goal of learning whether they are familiar with the term social entrepreneur, what traits they believe successful Greengrants grantees have, and how the concept of social entrepreneurship can benefit Greengrants. These surveys were a key component of this work because the coordinators and advisors will be the people ultimately using the social entrepreneurship tools, and therefore these individuals were a central part of this process. Many filled out the survey in writing, and one survey was done via phone interview. Written survey respondents were Denise Humphreys Bebbington, Wen Bo, Nnimmo Bassey, Nonette Royo, and Dmitry Lisitsyn. (The survey is provided in Appendix B.)

In addition to the written survey responses, other advisors' views were heard through different channels. Ravi Agarwal sent comments, although not a direct response to the survey; Juliette Majot was interviewed by phone; and advisors in West Africa were interviewed by Chris Allan, who took notes on the conversation and provided them for this study.

2.3 Feedback from Greengrants staff

Finally, Greengrants staff members were heavily involved in the process in several ways. First, Greengrants staff developed the concept of exploring a definition of social entrepreneur and applying it to Greengrants grantees. Individual staff members provided their personal and professional views and interpretations of the term and how it should be applied to Greengrants work in initial interviews. They also provided resources discussing social entrepreneurs with which they were familiar. In addition, Greengrants staff participated in two formal sessions where they reviewed early drafts of the definition and discussion of social entrepreneur, suggested changes, provided creative approaches to the challenges of defining the term, and suggested questions worthy of further exploration.

The definition in this paper, therefore, is the result of an iterative process of using external sources, coordinators, and advisors to suggest initial definitions and ideas, exploring these ideas with staff members in formal review sessions, and then going back to the literature and other external sources to further investigate the issues. The final result is a combination of all these sources, and the definition and discussion of social entrepreneurship in the Greengrants context. Through this work we have determined that Greengrants can use information about social entrepreneurship as a tool to help inform grant making. Further, it has become apparent that the lessons learned at Greengrants may prove useful to promoting the broader discussion surrounding social entrepreneurship.

3. Definition and discussion²

The literature review, surveys, and interviews, combined with review by Greengrants staff, resulted in the following definition of social entrepreneur in the context of Global Greengrants:

Social entrepreneurs address issues having a negative impact on individuals, societies and/or the environment through innovative, bold, and sometimes risky action. Social entrepreneurs work within organizations and networks to take a systemic approach to meet society's broadest needs with long-term, sustainable solutions. Traits of social entrepreneurs include being visionary, ambitious, persistent, motivated, inventive, adaptive, and resourceful.

In the following sections the key components of the above definition are explained in depth. Further, information about how relevant issues and decision processes were debated and decided upon is reviewed below.

3.1 The main difference between social entrepreneurs and successful grantees who are not social entrepreneurs is in the systemic and innovative approach employed by social entrepreneurs.

While many people and organizations are working to solve societal problems, they are not all social entrepreneurs. One distinction of social entrepreneurs is that they are taking an innovative approach to problem solving. Their innovation may be a new idea, new process, or new technology. It may also be adapting an existing idea, process, or technology into a new area, or in a new way or manner. Social entrepreneurs often recognize the opportunities that exist in change (i.e. changing technology, social circumstances, etc.) and use the change in new ways; they are not always responsible for the change itself.

A second distinction is that a social entrepreneur identifies systemic problems and finds sustainable solutions.³ Elements of a systemic approach include:

- Concentrating on interactions and interrelations among social issues, instead of individual issues, and looking at the effects of these interactions,
- Seeking to understand and address the long standing causal factors which generate problems,
- Looking for the key levers of influence across the whole system,
- Working on multiple issues simultaneously instead of one at a time,
- Taking into account changes over time,
- Avoiding shifting problems to other parts of society in a conscious manner.⁴

² This section is a longer version of a one page definition and discussion that was created for Greengrants advisors. The short document will be used to introduce the concept and discuss with advisors whether the definition of social entrepreneur can be applied to grantees in ways that help further Greengrants' goals.

³ This sentence touches on some ideas that are common across different sources. Dees (2001), for example, states social entrepreneurs "attack the underlying causes of problems, rather than simply treating symptoms. They often reduce needs rather than just meeting them."

⁴ These points adapted from two sources: J. Rosnay (1997): "Analytic vs. Systemic Approaches", in: F. Heylighen, C. Joslyn and V. Turchin (editors): *Principia Cybernetica Web* (Principia Cybernetica, Brussels), URL: <http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/ANALYSYST.html>; and Neil McClelland (1999) "Partnerships For Literacy: transforming literacy achievement via systemic, whole-community partnerships" accessed at <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/About/systemic.html#3%20Systemic%20approaches>

Taking a systemic approach is often tied to crafting a sustainable solution, because all elements of the problem are addressed. This does not mean that all social entrepreneurs should be able to solve the problems they are addressing in a foreseeable time frame; only that they are seeking to address underlying problems with long-term solutions.

3.2 Social entrepreneurs are focused on social change and creating public value;⁵ the financial bottom line is a secondary consideration tied to the sustainability of the organization.

“Entrepreneur” is often associated with profit-motivated individuals and organizations, and even some common definitions of “social entrepreneur” identify the triple bottom line of social and environmental benefits along with financial profits. Greengrants, however, is capturing a new understanding of social entrepreneurship as it applies to its grantees, who are not for-profit organizations, student groups, community-based organizations, etc. These grantees have to consider the financial sustainability of their organizations so are aware of financial considerations, but their focus is on their public mission of social change.

3.3 Social entrepreneurs are often supported by an organization and/or a network of people and organizations.

Entrepreneurs are rarely successful working alone. Instead, they work within and depend on their organizations to be successful, and are very willing to share credit for success within their organizations and networks. They also often create informal and formal networks of people and organizations working towards social change. The mobilization of networks is one of the key ways that social entrepreneurs help to create opportunities for change.

Organizations can also have entrepreneurial people within them—these people have been termed “intrapreneurs” and are recognized as a key component within Ashoka, among other organizations. Intrapreneurs bring entrepreneurial traits, skills, and goals to an organization. The term was coined for people within large corporations, but is now being used within smaller non-profit organizations as well.⁶ Intrapreneurs are often key to the success of the organizations that entrepreneurs create and lead. They are particularly useful within decentralized organizations in which individuals are able to make significant decisions outside of, or with relatively little oversight by, a formal decision-making hierarchy. The concept of intrapreneurs may be significant to Greengrants in two ways. The first is in having advisors consider organizations for funding that may demonstrate an entrepreneurial approach, in part because of the intrapreneurs within these organizations. The second way this concept may be useful is less well defined. Greengrants may fit the definition of an entrepreneurial organization, and some of its staff, advisors, and coordinators may be intrapreneurs. If so, Greengrants might think about how to best empower these intrapreneurs to serve Greengrants’ goals.

3.4 Social entrepreneurs are focused on building social movements, not on scalability

A social entrepreneur’s approach does not necessarily have to be scaleable, especially in the ways in which scalability is commonly understood. Within social entrepreneurship there are different types of scalability, including scalability of the organization, program, and principles.⁷ Where a business entrepreneur is concerned with growing a company, the social entrepreneur

⁵ “Create public value” is an adaptation of the definition of an entrepreneur as someone who creates (economic) value. This definition is mentioned in Dees (2001) and used elsewhere as well.

⁶ Grant La Rouche , Ashoka, personal communication November 29, and from intrapreneur.com.

⁷ Dees 2004.

concentrates on growing the movement, which is likely to be larger than the entrepreneur's organization. In business terms, this would be akin to the entrepreneur working to grow the industry instead of the company. While business entrepreneurs may be interested in growing entire industries, their main focus remains on their own company. Social entrepreneurs recognize, as one Greengrants advisor said, "This work is not about taking organizations to scale but about taking the movement to scale." This is not simply a view held by Greengrants advisors; several commentators within the Social Edge Dialogues on Social Entrepreneurship made similar remarks.⁸

3.5 Social entrepreneurs have other character traits in common in addition to those listed above.

The list of traits in the short definition above is a starting point and is not all encompassing. Other phrases and adjectives commonly used to describe social entrepreneurs include creative, dedicated, committed, and seeking fundamental change. Social entrepreneurs often are able to recognize trends, work across disciplines, and see opportunities across disciplines by making connections that others have not made.⁹

No single social entrepreneur has all these traits, but all have a combination of two or more. An additional common trait is a single-minded belief and confidence in their cause, their approach, or their solution to a problem. This is tied to the persistence that is a key to success—many social entrepreneurs are so convinced that their approach is correct that they can't imagine giving up their efforts; they are fully confident that their efforts will lead to success. This allows social entrepreneurs to be excellent "salespeople" for their ideas and efforts, which is another component of their success. This character trait is difficult to define, but a core element of a social entrepreneur.

Drayton puts it this way: a social entrepreneur

"...has a very special trait -- someone who, in the core of her/his personality, absolutely must change an important pattern across his/her whole society. Exceedingly few people have this driving motivation. Most scholars and artists come to rest when they express an idea; many managers relax when they solve the problem of only their company or institution; and most professionals are happy when they satisfy a client. It is only the entrepreneur who literally cannot stop until he or she has changed the whole society."¹⁰

The above list is comprised largely of traits, not skills. Some traits can perhaps be taught (e.g., working across disciplines), but most are the types of traits that some people naturally have, and can't be learned. This means that Greengrants can concentrate on finding social entrepreneurs, but will not be successful if it tries to create social entrepreneurs. However, it also means that Greengrants can find potential social entrepreneurs based on these traits and provide them with opportunities that will enable them to rise to the occasion.

⁸ Chertok 2003.

⁹ The list of traits is a combination of many sources: Dees, Drayton, Ashoka, and Davis among them. These traits were also mentioned by Greengrants advisors in the surveys and interviews.

¹⁰ Drayton quoted in Davis 2002, p. 7.

3.6 Social entrepreneurs are able to recognize opportunity and distinguish between transformative opportunities and paths that are not beneficial.

Social entrepreneurs are opportunistic, meaning that they are able to recognize opportunities where others do not see them, and act on these opportunities. “Opportunistic” can have a negative connotation because it suggests a lack of focus on a single mission, and an inconsistency that can hurt an organization. Social entrepreneurs, however, find opportunities that are consistent with their mission but transformative in how issues are addressed and solutions are created. The ability to see these opportunities that others don’t see, and to act to turn these opportunities into successes, is at the heart of common social entrepreneur traits such as being visionary, inventive, and resourceful.

3.7 “Measurable outcomes” is not necessarily a consideration in Greengrants’ definition of social entrepreneur.

Some definitions of social entrepreneur are focused on measurable outcomes, and some NGOs are increasingly concerned about quantifying measurable outcomes in their projects. Greengrants’ operating model, however, calls for greater flexibility than is possible in a system that requires traditional, quantitative, measurable outcomes. Greengrants grantees work towards articulated goals, and provide a final narrative report that describes how funds were used, the progress or outcome of the projects, and what was achieved with the grant. These outcomes are often qualitative and operate on longer time frames, and therefore cannot be measured using traditional methods.

3.8 Global Greengrants can identify social entrepreneurs in its network of grantees.

By focusing on the traits in the definition above, plus the key distinction of social entrepreneurs being innovative and focused on systemic change, Greengrants can identify social entrepreneurs among its current and potential grantees. This is not an easy process; it will first require discussing the definition with advisors and coordinators and possibly refining the definition. Second, advisors will use the definition as one of a set of tools to help them identify and consider potential grantees, and share their thinking with Greengrants staff, who will keep track of how advisors use the definition. Advisors and coordinators surveyed for this study thought that Greengrants could provide some additional support in terms of providing networking and information sharing opportunities to grantees, but also cautioned that some of this goes on already and artificial networks should not be created. Another respondent noted that learning from mistakes is important, and one type of sharing that should be encouraged is mistakes and lessons learned from mistakes.

4. Additional issues

In the course of developing a definition of social entrepreneurship that is appropriate for Greengrants the following two issues were especially challenging.

4.1 Can a social entrepreneur be an organization? Can an organization be social entrepreneurial?

Organizations can certainly be entrepreneurial, and Greg Dees, one of the leading thinkers about social entrepreneurs, notes, “the cult of the individual entrepreneur is a bit overblown. Most entrepreneurs I have known have depended on strong teams. We like having individual heroes, but entrepreneurial success is usually a group activity.”¹¹ Robert Reich, in the Harvard Business

¹¹ Greg Dees, personal communication, December 5.

Review article “Entrepreneurship Reconsidered: The Team as Hero,”¹² makes a similar argument.

Notwithstanding the recognition of the importance of organizations and networks to the success of entrepreneurs, however, social entrepreneurs are commonly recognized as people, not organizations. This point is implied in numerous papers and articles about social entrepreneurs, and was made explicitly by Grant LaRouche of Ashoka.¹³ To be consistent with the generally accepted definition, Greengrants is keeping the definition as applying to people, while stressing the importance of organizations and networks to the success of social missions.

The importance of entrepreneurial people within entrepreneurial organizations is explored above in section 3.7.

4.2 How do we distinguish social entrepreneurs from other successful people who are not social entrepreneurs?

This point is discussed in section 3.1 but bears further discussion because it is a difficult distinction. Notably, Greg Dees writes that the distinction is unclear: “Entrepreneurship...is a matter of degree. Some people (and organizations) are more entrepreneurial than others. It depends on how opportunity-oriented, innovative, resourceful, etc. they are... Many people are entrepreneurial to lesser degrees, or on some dimensions, but not others. Some people are not entrepreneurial at all. I do not think it is possible to draw a clear line marking who is in and who is out.”¹⁴

In response to a question regarding whether the founder of an environmental group in a developing country might be considered a social entrepreneur, Dees wrote “...this could be entrepreneurial, even though the level of innovation is not particularly dramatic. It would not be as entrepreneurial as developing a wholly new approach to environmental problems. Bringing an existing product to a new market is, however, a form of innovation...”¹⁵ Dees’ view reflects the understanding that distinguishing social entrepreneurs is context-specific; the parameters of being a social entrepreneur are not clear-cut and there are forms of innovation in addition to bringing an existing product or idea to a new market. All the traits listed in the definition are rarely, if ever, present in one person, and there are highly successful people who are not social entrepreneurs.

5. Example Greengrants social entrepreneur grantee

Identifying social entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial organizations within the Greengrants network is an important component of this work, and is key to illustrating the concepts being discussed. The Center for Public Interest Law (CEPIL) in Ghana is one example.

5.1 Issue background

In 2004, the Ghanaian government granted permits to mine gold in some of Ghana’s last remaining forests. Gold is a traditional export of Ghana, but this decision marked the first time the government had allowed mining companies access to fragile forest reserves. In defense of its

¹² Robert Reich 1987.

¹³ Grant La Rouche , Ashoka, personal communication November 29.

¹⁴ Greg Dees, personal communication, December 5.

¹⁵ Ibid.

decision, the Ghanaian government cited the mining companies plan to invest \$2 billion in the country. It also claimed that denying the mining companies' requests for extraction would have made their initial investment worthless and could send the wrong message to other investors that Ghana is not a safe environment for businesses. The controversial decision was met with considerable resistance from concerned local inhabitants who rely on the forests. Between 10,000 and 12,000 people use the forests for their food and livelihood and millions of people in both urban and rural areas depend on the rivers that run through the reserves for clean drinking water. The National Coalition of Civil Society Groups Against Mining in Ghana's Forest Reserves cited concerns about the proposed mining projects, and questioned the economic value of mining by demonstrating that areas in Ghana with mining have not seen an increase in the standard of living of the local population. This is in part because surface mining is increasingly capital intensive and requires fewer employees; the industry has accounted for only two percent of total employment nationwide. Further, Ghana's tax incentives allow these mining corporations to take upwards of 95% of mining profits out of the country. In contrast to the limited economic benefits of mining, the negative impacts would be substantial. In addition to the impacts to local people, only 12% of Ghana's once plentiful rain forests remain, and much of this remaining forest is nominally protected in forest reserves. The reserves permitted for mining are home to more than 50 endangered species of plants, mammals, butterflies, and birds.

5.2 The Center for Public Interest Law

CEPIL set out to represent and protect these forests and residents near the mining areas and improve the public oversight of the operations and the organizations involved. CEPIL has addressed the systemic problem of legal under-representation in a new, innovative, and bold way. CEPIL has empowered and protected people in mining communities, trained activists in legal proceedings, and provided critical research to substantiate claims by underprivileged communities. While the concept of addressing environmental issues through legal representation in civil court is common in the United States and other developed countries, in Ghana this is an innovative approach with wide implications. It addresses a root cause of an environmental and social problem that goes beyond mining—the lack of rights and legal recourse for people negatively impacted by companies' actions.

6. Conclusion: How this definition will be used

The process of defining social entrepreneur and determining example grantees is not merely an academic exercise for Greengrants; the process has been undertaken to determine whether Greengrants can better serve its advisory boards and grantees. Development of this paper is a first step that will be further reviewed by Greengrants staff and advisors, in order to determine if stakeholders across the organization agree with this definition and the overall approach of trying to identify social entrepreneurs as a subset of grantees.

The next steps in this process will be to share this definition with advisors and coordinators, and see if they are able to use the definition and discussion to identify social entrepreneurs among current and potential grantees. Applying the definition to existing grantees is a form of ground-truthing for the definition—does it apply to an appropriate number of grantees? If it applies to very few or no grantees, then it is too restrictive to be useful. Alternatively, if it applies to most or all grantees, then it is too encompassing, and needs to be narrowed.

Once the definition is determined to be appropriate—or adjusted if necessary—the next step will be to have advisors and staff use the definition to help in their grant making process. There are

several ways in which this might occur. First, potential grantees seen as social entrepreneurs may receive additional resources to help them succeed in creating social change. Recognizing that social entrepreneurs take bold and visionary action that sometimes fails, Greengrants might stick with these grantees even if their first efforts are not successful; indeed Greengrants might even encourage types of action with a greater probability of failure, but a greater payoff if successful. Finally, recognizing that entrepreneurs rely on organizations and networks, Greengrants might work to enhance these networks and networking opportunities, while recognizing that such networks should not be artificially created or pushed onto grantees if they don't see benefit.

Finally, if Greengrants determines that its definition is useful, the organization will have a significant contribution to make towards defining and exploring the larger meaning of social entrepreneurship. The social entrepreneur field is relatively undeveloped, and there is room for it to grow, to take on new meanings and most importantly to apply the meaning to real world solutions. Greengrants has a genuine opportunity to not only use existing concepts of social entrepreneurship to enhance its work, but then to take its learnings back to the social entrepreneur community, share those findings, and thus further the common understanding and applicability of social entrepreneurship.

Appendix A: Bibliography

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Websites

In addition to the papers and articles often accessed from specific URLs mentioned above, the following websites were used more generally in developing this document.

Ashoka (www.ashoka.org)

Intrapreneur.com (www.intrapreneur.com)

Pinchot and Company (www.pinchot.com)

Skoll Foundation (<http://www.skollfoundation.org/>)

Social Edge (skoll.socialedge.org/)

Schwab Foundation (www.schwabfound.org/)

Appendix B: Sample survey given to Greengrants advisors and coordinators

The following short survey is being conducted at the request of Global Greengrants, with a goal of enhancing Global Greengrants' ability to assist its grantees.

1. What are three attributes of the individuals you are familiar with who are leading successful grantee organizations (words or short phrases)?
 - A.
 - B.
 - C.

2. What are three attributes of successful grantee organizations (the organization itself, not the person/people in it)?
 - A.
 - B.
 - C.

3. Are there ways in which Global Greengrants can support grantees in addition to funding? If yes, how? Please be as specific as possible.

4. Do you believe that most grantee organizations are scaleable in their approach, in other words they could easily grow, if given necessary resources, without having to substantially change their processes? Are existing processes replicable?

5. Are you familiar with the term "social entrepreneurship"? (Yes or no)

6. Whether or not you have heard the term social entrepreneurship, what does it mean to you?

Global Greengrants is developing a definition of social entrepreneur to help the organization think about its grantees and the tools and resources that Greengrants might provide to assist grantees in their work. We do not have a definition developed yet, but we believe adjectives and phrases that describe social entrepreneurs include innovate, pattern changing, addressing systemic issues and underlying problems, high-energy, bold, adaptive, and accountable to their constituents.

1. Do you feel that grantees you have funded fit this description?

2. Based on this description, do you think that a social entrepreneur can be an organization, or must it be an individual?

3. Do you believe it would be appropriate for Global Greengrants to recognize individuals within grantee organizations as social entrepreneurs? Why or why not?