

# Conceptual Overview of What We Know about Social Entrepreneurship

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## INTRODUCTION

“The idea of ‘social entrepreneurship’ has struck a responsive chord,” wrote Dees (1998, p. 1). One may conclude that in the 10 years since Dees’ statement, the “responsive chord” has only become more responsive, given the growing attention from media, support organizations, policymakers, and targeted university research centers and teaching programs. Where entrepreneurship is widely acknowledged for bringing growth and economic wealth to society, social entrepreneurship is assumed to play the same role in creating social wealth in times where pressing social and ecological needs are abundant.

In spite of numerous contributions, the scholarly field of social entrepreneurship is still in a stage of infancy (Dees & Battle Anderson, 2006; Dorado, 2006; Light, 2008; Short, Moss, & Lumpkin, 2009; Hoogendoorn, Pennings, & Thurik, 2010). The aim of this chapter is to provide a conceptual overview of different perspectives on social entrepreneurship. Four schools of thought on social entrepreneurship are presented, key defining characteristics of each school are described, and findings of empirical studies concerning each school are discussed.

This chapter is structured as follows. In the next section, a broad description of social entrepreneurship is provided. Then, four different approaches to social entrepreneurship are presented followed by a section dedicated to describing the defining characteristics that distinguish these approaches from each other. Conclusions

and a discussion of empirical findings of each school of thought are presented in the final section.

## DEFINING SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Despite a growing focus on social entrepreneurship (and much like the entrepreneurship field in its early days), the field of social entrepreneurship lacks a unifying paradigm, and its boundaries are fuzzy with respect to other fields of research (Mair, Robinson, & Hockert, 2006). This situation is not surprising because a variety of conceptual perspectives have been applied to social entrepreneurship derived from a number of different domains, such as entrepreneurship, philanthropy, public management, nonprofits, and social issues in management. For example, notions of social entrepreneurship include the following: nonprofit organizations that apply business expertise to become more efficient in providing and delivering their social services (Boschec & McClurg, 2003; Reis & Clohesy, 2001); for-profit businesses run by nonprofits to help offset costs and become independent from grants and subsidies (Wallace, 1999); high donor control philanthropy, where donors pursue their own personal social vision (Ostrander, 2007); and socially responsible businesses that offer innovative solutions to persistent social, economic, and ecological problems using market-based models (Dees & Battle Anderson, 2006; Dorado, 2006). In addition, a range of closely related terms exists such as sustainable entrepreneurship,

community-based entrepreneurship, indigenous entrepreneurship, and the fair trade movement. As such, “[s]ocial entrepreneurship represents an umbrella term for a considerable range of innovative and dynamic international praxis and discourse in the social and environmental sector” (Nicholls, 2006, p. 5).

In general terms social entrepreneurship may be described as a type of entrepreneurship that concerns the process of discovering, evaluating, and pursuing opportunities primarily and intentionally aimed at the creation of social value by addressing social needs. Although the distinctiveness of social entrepreneurship may lay in its motives and mission (Dacin, Dacin, & Matear, 2010; Zahra, Rawhouser, Bhawe, Neubaum, & Hayton, 2009), the activities and processes through which individuals and organizations achieve these specific outcomes bear on the field of conventional entrepreneurship. It is the social component which adds to the concept’s inherent complexity (Cho, 2006). In general, social value creation is the contribution of the individual’s entrepreneurial effort to the broader society, such as the provision of clean water and education to deprived communities, the empowerment of women, and providing jobs for disabled people. What contributes to the complexity of the social component is that there is no consensus on which social objectives benefit society. According to Cho (2006), this discussion inevitably requires political choices and hence involves a “value” dimension, with regard to which concerns can claim to be in society’s “true” interest. However, within the extant literature on social entrepreneurship even within conceptual articles, the social element is often taken for granted.

#### FOUR DISTINCT APPROACHES TO SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The growing attention paid to social entrepreneurship from both a practitioner’s and an academic point of view can be explained by several general developments in recent decades such as a growing awareness of the persistent social and ecological ills of our

time, decreasing funding by the government in face of free market ideology, and an increasing demand for improved effectiveness and efficiency for both the social sector and nonprofit institutions. These and other<sup>1</sup> general developments together with region specific factors such as socioeconomic conditions gave rise to dissimilar approaches to social entrepreneurship in different contexts and resulted in various schools of thoughts.<sup>2</sup>

In this section two American schools of thought (i.e., the Innovation School of thought and the Social Enterprise School of thought) and two European approaches (i.e., EMES approach and UK approach) are explored. Although the approaches are often mixed in popular discourse, they reveal different perspectives and research preferences. In order to compare the schools of thought, the main distinctions and commonalities are summarized in the subsequent section.

*The Innovation School of thought.* The Innovation School of thought focuses on the social entrepreneurs as individuals who tackle social problems and meet social needs in an innovative manner. According to one recent examination, “[t]he school is focused on establishing new and better ways to address social problems or meet social needs” (Dees & Battle Anderson, 2006, p. 41). Social entrepreneurs do so by either establishing a nonprofit enterprise or a for-profit enterprise. For both schools of thought within the American tradition, private foundations that promote the strategic development of the sector and their founders have contributed significantly to the fundamentals of the schools. For the Social Innovation School of thought, Bill Drayton, founder of Ashoka, is considered the leading figure. This school of thought on social entrepreneurship is rooted in the body of knowledge of commercial entrepreneurship on the discovery, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities. In the case of social entrepreneurship, these opportunities are found in social needs exploited by innovative means to satisfy those needs.

*The Social Enterprise School of thought.* Within the Social Enterprise School of thought, the main subject of study is the enterprise, described as an entrepreneurial,

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1 nonprofit venture that generates “earned-  
 2 income” while serving a social mission. In  
 3 order to guarantee continuity of service pro-  
 4 vision, this school focuses on generating  
 5 income streams independent from subsidies  
 6 and grants. In addition to the theme of  
 7 funding, this school also promotes the idea  
 8 that adopting business methods is a success-  
 9 ful way to improve the effectiveness of non-  
 10 profit organizations and make them more  
 11 entrepreneurial. Edward Skloot is one of the  
 12 pioneers of this school of thought. He  
 13 founded New Business Ventures for Non-  
 14 profit Organisations in 1980, the first con-  
 15 sultancy firm working exclusively for  
 16 non-market companies, thus acknowledging  
 17 a new niche and a relevant topic of interest  
 18 for the third sector. The National Gathering  
 19 of Social Entrepreneurs,<sup>3</sup> led by Jerr Boschee  
 20 and Jed Emerson, amongst others, became  
 21 an influential private initiative promoting  
 22 the development of a more effective and  
 23 independent nonprofit sector.

24 Both above-mentioned schools of thought  
 25 that are part of the American tradition  
 26 where social entrepreneurship refers above  
 27 all to market-oriented economic activities  
 28 that serve a social goal irrespective of sector  
 29 (Nyssens, 2006). Within this tradition,  
 30 social entrepreneurship is considered a sub-  
 31 field of entrepreneurship that results in  
 32 scholarly attention both from business  
 33 schools and social sciences. Strategic devel-  
 34 opment such as the promotion of social  
 35 entrepreneurship and the creation and  
 36 improvement of sector infrastructure is  
 37 orchestrated by private foundations, of  
 38 which Ashoka and the Skoll Foundation are  
 39 probably the most well known.

40 *The EMES approach.* The Emergence of  
 41 Social Enterprise in Europe (EMES)  
 42 Research Network began in 1996 and con-  
 43 sists of scholars cooperating in order to  
 44 investigate the social enterprise phenomenon  
 45 and establish a broad definition that allows  
 46 for the national differences within the Euro-  
 47 pean Union. The main objective of the  
 48 research of the EMES network is the emer-  
 49 gence and growth of social enterprises  
 50 within the European Union. The “ideal  
 51 typical” definition used by the EMES  
 52 network defines the characteristics of the

social enterprise within this approach. As in  
 the Social Enterprise School, the unit of  
 observation is the enterprise. In the case of  
 the EMES approach, the social enterprise  
 has an explicit aim to benefit the commu-  
 nity, is launched by a group of citizens, enjoys  
 a high degree of autonomy, is participatory  
 in nature, and does not base decision-  
 making power on capital ownership. In  
 general, the organizations within this  
 approach consist of the following types:  
 associations, cooperatives, mutual organiza-  
 tions, and foundations. In contrast to the  
 Social Enterprise School, which applies a  
 non-distribution constraint to profits, the  
 EMES approach allows for some profit dis-  
 tribution due to the inclusion of cooperatives.  
 Although such cooperatives exist  
 within the United States, they are not subject  
 to the social enterprise discourse.

*UK approach.* Despite the broadness of  
 the definition applied by the EMES Research  
 Network, the UK approach to social entre-  
 preneurship is distinct from the EMES  
 approach and the American tradition and  
 therefore allows for a separate approach.  
 When the Labour Party came to power in  
 the UK in the late 1990s, it proactively tried  
 to stimulate partnerships between civil  
 society, the public sector, and the private  
 sector. In order to promote the establish-  
 ment of social enterprises throughout the  
 country, the Blair government launched  
 the Social Enterprise Coalition and created  
 the Social Enterprise Unit within the Depart-  
 ment of Trade and Industry (DTI). The DTI  
 defined social enterprise as comprising  
 “businesses with primarily social objectives  
 whose surpluses are principally reinvested  
 for that purpose in the business or the com-  
 munity, rather than being driven by the need  
 to maximize profits for shareholders and  
 owners.”<sup>4</sup> Since 2006, all social enterprise  
 affairs have been the responsibility of a  
 newly established ministry of the Third  
 Sector dedicated to improving the profes-  
 sionalism of the sector, ameliorating access  
 to financial sources, and refining the legal  
 framework in favor of sector growth. UK  
 social enterprises are subject to a limited  
 distribution of profits and can be initiated  
 by individuals, groups of citizens, or by legal

entities. In contrast to the EMES approach, the goods and services provided can be related, unrelated, or central to the venture’s mission. In addition, the social enterprises in the UK are trading within the market.

Within the European approach, social enterprises are generally of the nonprofit or cooperative type, are dedicated to the creation of social impact for the community, and combine revenue generation with the work or participatory activity of program beneficiaries (Defourny, 2009; Nyssens, 2006). Strategic development is initiated by governments rather than by private foundations. In contrast with the American tradition, social entrepreneurship mainly attracts scholarly attention from the social sciences.

**DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN DIFFERENT APPROACHES**

Although the different schools of thought and approaches are distinct from each other, there are no strict boundaries between them. In fact, they are still evolving, a point well illustrated by a recent argument proposing to converge the two American schools of thought into a single concept called “Enterprising Social Innovation” (Dees & Battle Anderson, 2006). Despite this blurring of boundaries, exploring the distinctions and commonalities contributes to an understanding of conceptual differences.

The approaches, as described above, share one main commonality: their emphasis on the creation of social value. While it is a long-held belief that entrepreneurs contribute positively to society, it is motivation and the relative importance of social value creation (as opposed to economic value creation) that distinguishes social entrepreneurs from commercial entrepreneurs (Hoogendoorn, 2011).

The distinctions of the different schools of thought are described along seven lines and summarized in Table 12.1. Taken together, the ideas behind these distinctions and the creation of social value reveal a broad overview of the main research subjects within the field.

*Unit of observation.* The Social Innovation School assigns the social entrepreneur an important role. Illustrative is the following quotation from Bill Drayton: “People understand this field by anecdote rather than theory, so a fellow we decide to elect becomes a walking anecdote of what we mean by a social entrepreneur” (Bornstein, 2007, p. 120). For the other approaches, the enterprise is the central unit of observation, and attention shifts from the individual to teams of entrepreneurs. In addition, the initiator of the social enterprise differs between the various approaches. Within the Innovation School, the initiation of a social venture is mainly associated with a single individual, whereas within the EMES approach the initiator is by definition a group of citizens.

**Table 12.1 Distinctions between schools of thought on social entrepreneurship**

Distinctions	American tradition		European tradition	
	Social Innovation School	Social Enterprise School	EMES approach	UK approach
Unit of observation	Individual	Enterprise	Enterprise	Enterprise
Link mission–services	Direct	Direct/indirect	Direct	Direct/indirect
Legal structure	No constraints	Nonprofit	Some constraints	No constraints
Innovation	Prerequisite	Not emphasized	Not emphasized	Not emphasized
Profit distribution	No constraint	Constraint	Limited constraint	Limited constraint
Earned income	Not emphasized	Prerequisite	Not emphasized	Important
Governance	Not emphasized	Not emphasized	Multiple stakeholder involvement emphasized	Multiple stakeholder involvement recommended

1 The remaining two approaches are less  
 2 explicit in this respect, and individuals,  
 3 groups of citizens, or legal entities can initi-  
 4 ate the establishment of a social enterprise.

5 *Relationship between mission and serv-*  
 6 *ices.* A second dissimilarity is the connection  
 7 between the mission and the products and  
 8 services provided. Within the Social Enter-  
 9 prise School and the UK approach, a direct  
 10 link between mission and activities is not a  
 11 necessity. Goods and services provided can  
 12 be related, unrelated, or central to the ven-  
 13 ture's mission. This allows for more flexibil-  
 14 ity in running for-profit ventures aiming to  
 15 generate an independent income stream. In  
 16 both of the other approaches, the connec-  
 17 tion is either central or related.

18 *Legal structure.* The Social Innovation  
 19 School and the UK approach put no limita-  
 20 tion on legal structure. The Social Enterprise  
 21 School exclusively considers nonprofits.  
 22 Within the EMES approach, it is the  
 23 degree of autonomy of the venture that is  
 24 important, a focus that allows for certain  
 25 restrictions on the juridical form. Social  
 26 enterprises are not to be managed directly  
 27 or indirectly by public authorities or other  
 28 organizations.

29 *Innovation.* Innovation is clearly one of  
 30 the defining features of the Innovation  
 31 School. The level of innovativeness is one of  
 32 the main criteria for Ashoka in the decision  
 33 process of supporting a social entrepreneur.  
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35 Ashoka cannot elect someone to the Fellow-  
 36 ship unless he or she is possessed by a new  
 37 idea—a new solution or approach to a social  
 38 problem—that will change the pattern in a  
 39 field, be it human rights, the environment, or  
 40 any other.<sup>5</sup>

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 42 For those involved in this school of thought,  
 43 fundamental change or Schumpeterian  
 44 change is considered a prerequisite. The  
 45 other approaches acknowledge the impor-  
 46 tance of creativity and innovativeness, but  
 47 neither principle is fundamental to the basis  
 48 of any of these approaches.

49 *Profit distribution.* The Social Innovation  
 50 School leaves the entrepreneur free to  
 51 choose whatever is necessary to achieve her  
 52 goals; this means no constraints on the

distribution of profits. In contrast, for the  
 Social Enterprise School, a nondistribution  
 constraint on profits is one of the fundamen-  
 tal principles and is inherent to the non-  
 profit status of the enterprises within this  
 particular school. Social enterprises within  
 the EMES and the UK approaches encom-  
 pass enterprise types that are subject to a  
 total nondistribution constraint as well as  
 those, such as cooperatives, that may dis-  
 tribute profits to a limited extent as long as  
 profit maximizing behavior is avoided  
 (Nyssens, 2006).

53 *Earned income.* The Social Enterprise  
 54 School, and to a lesser extent the UK  
 55 approach, emphasize the importance of  
 raising commercial income independent of  
 grants and subsidies to secure sustainability  
 and financial viability. Within the EMES  
 approach, “financial viability depends on  
 the effort of its members to secure adequate  
 resources to support the enterprise's  
 mission” (Nyssens, 2006, p. 12). The viabil-  
 ity is irrespective of the amount of income  
 generated by the enterprise. Hence, income  
 generation is not an important issue within  
 this approach.

56 *Governance.* Governance is an important  
 57 subject within the EMES approach. Multiple  
 58 stakeholder involvement, democratic man-  
 59 agement, and the participative nature of the  
 60 ventures are all fundamental to this  
 61 approach. Within the UK approach, govern-  
 62 ance is considered an important topic, but  
 63 direct or indirect involvement of stakehold-  
 64 ers can vary in accordance with the legal  
 65 structure of the enterprise. It is by no means  
 as fundamental for the UK approach as for  
 the EMES approach. The Social Innovation  
 School is in favor of involving stakeholders  
 by creating partnership and networks  
 through which ideas, knowledge, and exper-  
 tise can flow between organizations aiming  
 to achieve the same social objective. Demo-  
 cratic management is not considered an  
 issue. The Social Enterprise School is in  
 favor of leaving the founders of the enter-  
 prise complete freedom to achieve their  
 goals. From this perspective, multiple stake-  
 holder involvement is to be discouraged if it  
 hinders the effective management both of  
 economic and of social goals.

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The main contribution of this chapter is to define more clearly the concept of social entrepreneurship and to characterize the four main existing schools of thought. We lay out the goals and approaches of each school. However, it is very difficult to assess the extent to which goals are met and how much actual practices reflect the commitments of the school's adherents. Hoogendoorn and colleagues (2010) analyzed the content of the 31 empirical studies and some of the main findings concerning each school of thought are summarized below.

The defining characteristics of the Innovation School of thought are twofold: (1) the individual social entrepreneur who is assigned a series of exceptional qualities, and (2) innovation in order to bring about structural social change. The empirical results on the individual level neither confirm nor deny the presence of exceptional qualities that the Social Innovation School tends to assign to social entrepreneurs. Apart from some specific motives and use of language, social entrepreneurs do not seem to be very different from their commercial counterparts. In fact, current research provides little insight on the individual entrepreneur compared with the findings obtained for popular themes in research on conventional entrepreneurship such as demographics, personality characteristics, attitudes toward risk and financial rewards, and educational experiences.

With regard to innovation, some studies captured this topic, but extensive empirical research remains scarce. Especially within this particular school, the absence of research on disruptive change, addressing and changing the structures that caused social and environmental problems in the first place, is a glaring omission. In fact we may conclude that innovation is one of social entrepreneurship's defining elements, rather than being empirically grounded.

When it comes to the Social Enterprise School the defining characteristics of this research tradition are again twofold: (1) earned income strategies, and (2) the non-distribution constraint. Earning a commer-

cial income in the market and becoming or staying independent from grants and subsidies is one of the fundamentals of the Social Enterprise School of thought. Surprisingly, earned income and income strategies seem to be almost completely absent from the reviewed articles irrespective of their research tradition.

We encounter another gap when considering the second key characteristic of the Social Enterprise School, namely, limited or complete profit distribution. None of the empirical studies pay attention to this subject, despite the fact that the effects of the constraints on otherwise presumed profit-maximizing behaviors are interesting, especially in light of the current discussions on misconduct in profit maximizing behavior by commercial enterprises.

Governance is an important distinction in the EMES approach. Several studies focus on this particular defining characteristic with mixed results. Whereas a study by Nyssens (2006) reveals that the representation of numerous stakeholders on the board is indeed a good way to efficiently manage the multiple goal character of the social enterprises, other studies draw less favorable conclusions about the governance of social enterprises. Sharir and Lerner (2006) conclude that governing board performance is poor and Borzaga and Defourny (2001) found that multiple stakeholder involvement is a source of inefficiency in the case of conflicting interests since it limits the ability to react to a changing environment.

The defining distinction of the UK approach is not a single characteristic that sets it apart from the other schools of thought. The wide scope of the construct and, hence, the flexibility of the approach is what makes it distinct from other traditions. The discussion so far in this final section has focused on an individual and on an organizational level of analysis. With regard to the UK approach, we would like to switch to a macro or aggregate level of analysis. Research on a national, regional, and even a sectoral level is completely lacking in our inventory of research findings, and the achievement of the UK in putting "social entrepreneurship" successfully on top of the

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agenda offers a chance to address this void. Evaluation of current UK policies, the factors obstructing and promoting policy implementation, and possibilities for replication are particularly relevant for policymakers. Even on a more basic level, it is worthwhile to explore the actual degree of social entrepreneurial activity in a country, as well as potential differences and determinants that might explain these differences. Although some insights regarding the level of social entrepreneurial activity are available for the UK (Harding & Cowling, 2006), this is not the case for other countries. Actually, the macro level of analysis opens a new field of unexplored research opportunities concerning subjects such as employment, investments, policy formation, and service provision.

If social entrepreneurship is to be considered a valid means of achieving social goals it is important that research is employed to determine whether the approach is successful, and if so what are the aspects of each model that are crucial to success. We also need to better understand the contextual and resource constraints and supports that relate to more and less successful ventures.

## NOTES

1. See for a more detailed description of these developments Hoogendoorn et al., 2010.
2. These approaches draw on work of Dees and Battle Anderson who can be credited with the distinction between the Social Innovation School of thought and the Social Enterprise School of thought (Dees & Battle Anderson, 2006) and Bacq & Janssen (2011), Degroote (2008), and Kerlin (2006).
3. In 2002, the National Gathering of Social Entrepreneurs was renamed Social Enterprise Alliance after merger with SeaChange, a foundation with comparable aims.
4. See [www.socialenterprise.org.uk](http://www.socialenterprise.org.uk).
5. See [www.ashoka.org](http://www.ashoka.org).

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