



Entrepreneurial welfare: two views

'Social entrepreneurs' can help disadvantaged communities find their own solutions, according to **Nic Frances** ...

I AM RELUCTANT to talk about social entrepreneurship, or social enterprise, without clearly stating that with 660,000 unemployed in this country the problems we face are obviously structural economic-management problems. How is it possible that Australia's economic performance is regularly hailed as 'miraculous and world-beating', but we can have nearly a million children living in families with no adult in the workforce?

We need structural responses led by government to redress Australia's growing social and economic divide. It will take strong leadership and a committed alliance between sectors and organisations to push for those responses from our policy-makers.

But there is no doubt that even if we were to halve the unemployment rate there would still be certain communities around the country who would not significantly benefit. The organisation I work with, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, sits right across the road from one such community. Atherton Gardens is a public housing estate with four huge high rises (20 per cent of them empty at any one time), a community of 1400 people and a range of all the social issues you'd expect in an area of high unemployment, cultural mix and disadvantage.

At Atherton Gardens we offer about 60 different types of services and we currently have 14 different programs operating on the estate. The interesting thing is that, until quite recently, the people involved in those programs have not come together and asked, 'What is our vision for the way we are going to work on this estate? Could we be doing it differently *together*? Could we be spending

this money better?' The Brotherhood has not joined with other welfare agencies to ask these questions and, until recently, we have not asked the community.

There is a real need for a new approach to communities like Atherton Gardens, one that involves reclaiming the financial support, resources and skills currently being poured into the community from outside. It is vital that we find ways to hear these communities' voices, and support them in creating their own sustainable solutions; that we offer promise for the future and some help to change the situation these communities face.

To operate effectively in a welfare organisation like ours, you need to be a social entrepreneur in all aspects of the work. Social entrepreneurs do not fit easily into the existing structures and relationships between government and welfare organisations; rather than being caught up in the existing momentum, they look at these relationships in a fresh way. Old challenges, as much as new challenges, demand new ways of thinking and operating.

In my work in the social sector I am always amazed at the inability of government departments—local, state or federal—to engage locally and to join, build or add value to exciting initiatives. In government you find some of the brightest and most able people—passionate about these causes. So why, at the end of the day, is it so hard to get those people around the same table? My sense is

that bureaucrats see themselves as gatekeepers, as custodians, keeping funding money safe from the abuse of those in the community. They do not see their role as helping us, the people on the ground, to break the rules.

Each welfare organisation, too, is looking after its own. This may seem an odd observation, but in an important sense organisations are compelled to do this. It goes with managing the organisation and is integral to the generation and maintenance of funding. In general, when welfare organisations deal with government, not only are we not talking to each other, but in many cases our funding regime leads to our actively withholding information from each other—to give ourselves a 'competitive edge'.

Social entrepreneurs can change these relationships. We should not assume that simply because we manage an organisation we're producing worthwhile outcomes for the community. To do that means changing the way government is involved; a constructive way to achieve this is to work *with* and work *around*.

So, how do you create a new kind of ownership for a community like Atherton Gardens? How do you help people see their community for its potential and not for its problems? There is nothing more compelling than having a job or a stake in their community to bring out people's sense of ownership and power. Social entrepreneurs are important as catalysts



who can look at a community and see opportunities where others see problems. They can then gather people from the communities to take advantage of those opportunities. They can create sustainable responses that do not rely on government funding or the goodwill of charities, but are based on the community's willingness and passions. Of course, social entrepreneurship is not the only solution; being

entrepreneurial doesn't mean that you won't also need particular and directed welfare services.

But I know that it is not good enough for the Brotherhood of St Laurence to sit opposite a community with 95 per cent unemployment, year after year, paying its staff who live in wealthier areas to come in and deliver services to a community that isn't fundamentally changing and

improving. We must find new models of engagement that are more empowering and honouring of the community. We must have keener ears to listen. And have gentle hands and feet to tread on this new ground, to rediscover how we become servant, not 'saviour'. ■

Nic Frances is Executive Director of the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

I ... but we need to be careful not to import the wrong values, argues **Liz Curran**.

FIRST HEARD THE term 'social entrepreneur' in 1997 when a colleague of mine, a Chair of Prison Chaplaincy for many decades, attended a corrections seminar run by a private prison. His occupation was described on his name tag as 'Social Entrepreneur'. He refused to wear the name tag because he objected to the presumption that his involvement in chaplaincy had an entrepreneurial intent. Some five years later, the terminology of 'social entrepreneur' has crept into philanthropic circles. The term has been embraced by Noel Pearson, Nic Frances, Tony Abbott and Cheryl Kernot. But before such a concept is endorsed, it needs to be unpacked.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines the word 'entrepreneur' as a 'person who undertakes an enterprise or business with the chance of profit or loss, the person in effective control of a commercial undertaking' and a person who 'undertakes entertainments'. John Ralston Saul's dictionary definitions of management/corporate-speak comically highlight the misconceptions and dangers of allowing language to be co-opted without clarity and accuracy about its meaning and how it is applied.

Language is an extremely powerful tool. When you change language or accept new language it can change your ideas, vision or ideals and can build up a new untested philosophy. We have seen this with recent promotion of notions like 'mutual obligation', which contain much discussion about the obligations to society of the person on low social security benefits, but little about the reciprocal obligations of government and those who have power and resources. With the current spin placed on it by politicians and the media, 'mutual obligation' makes it easier to blame individual people for

their personal circumstances without recognising the systemic causes of injustice. We need to discuss concepts like 'social entrepreneurship' to ensure that meanings and assumptions are transparent, informed by experience, and have sound underpinnings.

It is often assumed—even within community organisations—that because the community sector does not operate on commercial terms it must be inefficient. Very little evidence exists to back up this assertion, and the sector's role in building 'social capital' is seldom factored into such an analysis. Perhaps, on occasions, the sector is inefficient, and it is always a challenge to work towards better responses. Ongoing reviews and evaluations are certainly necessary, but we need to remember that the human-services sector works with complex social problems, which makes it difficult to compartmentalise and streamline. The sector also garners a huge amount of voluntary input and commitment, saving taxpayers millions of dollars.

Used carelessly, terms like 'social entrepreneur' have the potential to diminish those involved in social-service delivery. They can come to be seen only as self-interested members of an 'industry' seeking new partnerships to increase injections of money, rather than as an essential component of civil society. The community sector needs to be more vigilant and clear about the language used to describe what it does. It needs to claim and own its function and role in society and its important contribution.

Unfettered market forces, competition and quantitative 'benchmarking' are often inappropriate frameworks for community services as they can lead to social fragmentation. Certainly, efficiency and performance have improved in some

community organisations, but in the process there can also be an unseen social cost if care is not taken. When linked to social justice and human-service delivery, the term 'entrepreneur' can lead to misunderstandings about the very basis upon which those working in the field undertake that work. Their role is to increase social cohesion and offer a commitment to the betterment of society, ensuring that all citizens—especially the marginalised—can access and exercise their full rights of citizenship. To do this they often need to challenge power and those in authority. There is no reason why government, businesses and the community sector shouldn't work in full and respectful partnerships that address systemic and individual disadvantage. But they all need to be in for the long haul and recognise that the field has knowledge and expertise that should be respected and valued. The stakes for our community are too high for these to be discarded.

The community sector is not merely about providing charity on a basis which may seem desirable to a business enterprise. The prevention and avoidance of inequities is also an aim. If we uncritically accept the ideas of social entrepreneurship, we risk underplaying or undervaluing the role the community sector plays in social change and community cohesion. What must not be lost is the capacity for independent advocacy. What must be retained is a focus—not just on service delivery but on systemic solutions to problems. This may not be attractive to many 'social entrepreneurs'. ■

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