



Bill Drayton and Sally Osberg on Growth and Transformation of Social Entrepreneurship

What are social entrepreneurs? What are the unique ways in which they work to achieve lasting solutions to the enormous problems facing humankind? What makes social entrepreneurship different from other approaches to social change?

[Bill Drayton](#), Founder and CEO of [Ashoka](#), and [Sally Osberg](#), President and CEO of the [Skoll Foundation](#), sat down with Skoll's Director of Public Engagement [Suzana Grego](#) to discuss these questions, and to talk about why they continue to be excited by the social entrepreneurship movement as it grows and transforms.

This document includes selected transcripts of the interview with Bill and Sally. [Browse the original Spotlight on Skoll.org.](#)

Transcribed video: [How a social entrepreneur ended smallpox](#)

Sally: I think it's easiest to understand the social entrepreneur through an example, and so I will provide one that doesn't immediately come to mind for folks, [Bill Foege](#). Bill Foege was a medical doctor, an epidemiologist working for the CDC when the World Health Organization and the Congress of Nations came together to eradicate smallpox.

He was on the front lines in Africa, part of this coalition, an enormous public-private partnership that had determined they would vaccinate everybody in the world. He realized as he was trying to carry out this mandate just how vast it would be. The goal seemed to get further and further away.

And so he came up with an idea to really test whether you could vaccinate only those who had been exposed to smallpox. And so he put a network that was readily to hand and these were ministers working throughout Nigeria. He put that network to work in identifying active cases of smallpox, and then proceeded to vaccinate only those who had been exposed to the disease. And in those villages, smallpox receded.

Armed with that information, he was able to bring that model to these partners in the WHO working all over the world and that was the solution. It was that innovation and it was that very resourceful way of addressing a problem at this level, that led to the eradication of this horrific disease, the first disease to be eradicated in the history of the world. People don't think of Bill Foege as a social entrepreneur, but that solution, and that experiment, and its success in shifting that equilibrium forever, that is to me quintessential social entrepreneurship.

Transcribed video: [Cracking the code on unjust equilibria](#)

A defining feature of the social entrepreneur's approach is the focus on equilibrium change—moving from an unjust status quo to a new, more just and harmonious order. Sally Osberg explains.

Since you raised this key insight around an equilibrium, this appreciation that the social entrepreneur brings to understanding at a system's level, at the level of an equilibrium, a status quo that severely disadvantages some segment of society and that's the motivation for the social entrepreneur to really go to work to shift this equilibrium to a new level which actually brings advantage, brings opportunity, addresses the injustice of a current equilibrium.

That approach is actually something that's so needed in society writ large, but also at a community level because unless we are going at the underlying injustices, unless we are understanding the forces, the actors, the incentives, the disincentives, we don't have really much hope of being able to crack the code on what it will take to shift that, shift that equilibrium.

That seems to me to be really important to understanding entrepreneurship and understanding social entrepreneurship.

Transcribed video: [Social entrepreneurs point the way](#)

Once we recognize the power of social entrepreneurs to create massive change for the better, the next question is, as Bill Drayton asks: "How do we build a community that enables entrepreneurs, the great entrepreneurs for the good of all, to work together?" This has been the focus of Ashoka and the Skoll Foundation.

Bill: And so it is the social entrepreneurs who are pointing where we need to go, and pulling us back when we're about to go off the cliff. Wherever anything is stuck, could be better, the entrepreneurs come up, when the timing is ripe. The power of the individual entrepreneur is enormous. The power of us working together is much, much greater but absolutely essential.

...And fortunately, I think this is one of the main purposes that we share is, how do we build a community that enables entrepreneurs, the great entrepreneurs for the good of all, to work together.

Transcribed video: [Communities unified](#)

One response to this question of how to build an international community of social entrepreneurs has been the [Skoll World Forum](#) in Oxford, England. It's an event that brings the community together once a year in the same physical space to help accelerate this global movement for change.

Sally: And so it's very interesting to me, and it's one of the greatest sources I think of inspiration and knowledge for us as a foundation, to understand or to benefit from the deep understanding they have of these communities and these societies with whom they work so closely. We see some very interesting cross domain community building, and trust building, and knowledge sharing among the social entrepreneurs and feel deeply enriched ourselves by that.

...So lots of interesting cross-fertilization among communities.

Bill: This is one of the purposes of the Skoll Forum, it actually brings this community together physically along with large parts of the rest of the community.

...there's a very special tie between us because we're working at the level of designing the architecture as well as the direct service, supporting individuals. The new form of leadership is envisage, enable, ensure and the first thing you've got to do is help people, "Oh, this is the new goal."

And then the heart of empowerment is, how do you build the synaptic architecture that allows people to work together? That's partly clarity of definition, it's partly setting up practical mechanisms that actually allow people to work together across subjects, within subjects, across geography or not. The world that's emerging is very likely human brain in that it has omni-directional connection that comes together - from every point - that comes together selectively around whatever goal society needs.

Transcribed video: [Building a community of possibility](#)

The growing global community of social entrepreneurs offers a creative and hopeful response to a rapidly changing world filled with big, complex problems. It's an approach rooted in caring and empathy, Bill Drayton says.

Bill: And to get there, we have to have every parent, everyone understand, that young people understand this is the new game. You've got to fundamentally change this. If we do that, then we have a world where there's no way that the problems outrun the solutions because everyone is a change maker and we know how to work together. We have the cognitive empathy based skills guiding us that allow us to do this.

And then it's also a much more equal world because everyone is powerful. Everyone is a giver, and everyone is only effective because they're really good at understanding and genuinely care about everyone and the whole.

But it's terrifying, the world is changing so fast, and if you aren't a change maker, you're out of that game. And that's the worst thing you can do. You can't contribute, you're not welcome. So I worry about that. We could end up with a deeply divided and therefore very angry society. I think you can see that evolving all across the world. Or we can break out into a very much better place.

Transcribed video: [Fearless solutions drivers](#)

There's no denying it, the problems we face are enormous, and things often seem to be going in the wrong direction. But Sally Osberg finds reasons for hope: "the degree of fearlessness and determination that social entrepreneurs bring to these challenges is I think exceptional."

Sally: we've seen this willingness to take on really these extremely complex, indeed wicked problems. Whether it's climate change, women's rights, girls' education, access to high quality healthcare, that social entrepreneurs see the imperative to address these challenges and find the interventions that really can bring about a more just, equitable world.

And that courage and that determination in the face of so much that seems to be morphing in the wrong direction at alarming speed, I think that's heartening and at the same time it's daunting. But the

degree of fearlessness and determination that social entrepreneurs bring to these challenges is I think exceptional.

Transcribed video: [Bridging the gap between problems and solutions](#)

Social entrepreneurs are “the peacemakers, the bridge builders, they're bringing trust and bringing new potential for unification into society,” says Sally Osberg.

Sally: What gives me hope and what encourages me are these actors in even the most contested situation, who are working in this very social way. Who will listen, who are bridges between people who disagree, even when they disagree violently. But they are the peacemakers, the bridge builders, they're bringing trust and bringing new potential for unification into society.

I think of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its work in South Africa, and how influential that has been with the whole issue of transitional justice...that insight about Truth and Reconciliation in Rwanda, in the US, it's profound. And so that's what gives me hope that we may yet break through with those kinds of structures to bridge and heal the fragmenting and the rifts in society.

Transcribed video: [Value comes from change](#)

How is social entrepreneurship changing? Bill Drayton is thrilled to see the movement growing and evolving, to see people working together for the common good.

Bill: The biggest change I think is that we now have the most vibrant sector.

We attract the best students including at the business schools, because what is more exciting than caring and building an organization, and even more important, a movement of people working together to cause some change for the good of all. That's what the field does. And it's I think quite thrilling that we have made this progress.

The world has been going through a change and we're a part of that, so there's an underlying shift to know that value comes from change, not repetition.

Transcribed video: [Movements that move mountains](#)

Sally Osberg thinks about social entrepreneurship within the broader context of organizations, institutions, and movements for social change. It's incumbent on social entrepreneurs to understand where they fit within this larger ecosystem.

Sally: We talk about institutions, we talk about organizations. We even talk in a very fluid way of movements, the suffrage movement and the movement for women's rights, and the LGBT movements, and the continued movement for civil rights, globally as well as in the US.

Along the way in those movements, there are key organizations, there are moments, I think of the role of Brown versus Board of Education in the US civil rights movement.

Organizations, networks, actors, protests, key legislative victories along the way, they all have a role to play, and so it's incumbent on us, as people who are invested in this arc of social change, to understand

these players and to broaden our appreciation of what kinds of actors, and what kinds of institutions, and what kinds of evolving organizations. Black Lives Matter is very different from the NAACP. I want to understand these actors better, but I think I would admit to being a very far away from having mastered that understanding.

Transcribed video: [Social entrepreneurs listen first](#)

“Entrepreneurs listen,” says Bill Drayton. “If you’re not listening, you’ll never succeed.”

Bill: Entrepreneurs listen. That's when things that -- you have a goal, this is where history is going, this is really important. Sally has been working on this now for a long time. She's really clear and she listens, like all good entrepreneurs.

So all these forces you're describing, you're describing because you're listening and you're seeing and you're figuring out how to make them work. That really is what entrepreneurs do. You don't have an idea and go and implement it. That's McDonalds. If you're not listening, you'll never succeed.

An entrepreneur, their life is devoted to having their vision become the new reality. If you aren't listening to all these forces, all the time, and changing every day, you're out of the game.