

Social enterprises – the answer to true happiness?



By
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LIVING in Boston has a number of upsides. One of them is the opportunity to meet world-renowned luminaries, who often come to Harvard, Massachusetts Institute of Technology or Boston University to interact with academics and students.

Saturday was one such day, when Dr Mohammad Yunus, the Nobel Peace Prize winner and the founder of Grameen bank, inspired many at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government with his thoughts on social enterprises and capitalism.

His conclusion was that there is an under-recognised, yet-to-be-explored parallel economy that can be established, formed of only social enterprises and its ecosystem.

This left me intrigued.

Humans have a multitude of talents, and profit-seeking behaviour is just one of them.

But the aim of these inherent talents is to bring us happiness one way or another.

For example, a businessman is happy when his business makes a profit; a guitarist is happy when he composes a new song and strums it to an applauding crowd; and a gardener is happy when the seed he sows grows into a healthy tree over time.

A traditional profit-making company often paints the world in a single colour



for a human being, who is really born a rainbow. We become accustomed to the way things are done and mould ourselves to be a part of it.

At the end of a tiring day at work, the guitarist doesn't have energy to compose new tunes and the gardener doesn't have time to water the plants.

The fact that a social enterprise's aims are much more diverse than just making profit means that it can cater to a diverse group of people and allow them to explore their talents further – talents which give them happiness and satisfaction, not just money.

According to Dr Yunus, a social enterprise can be distinguished into three main categories.

The first is a profit-making enterprise that is owned by the poor, such that the equity helps lift the poor out of poverty.

An example of this is the Grameen bank in Bangladesh.

Another type of social enterprise is a partnership between a profit-making and a non-profit company, for the benefit of a cause. The companies recover their costs and pump the profits back into the cause.

An example of this is the Danone-Grameen partnership to feed children suffering from malnutrition.

The last type of social enterprise is simply one that pumps all its profits to a special cause, as in the case of Food From The Heart, a voluntary welfare organisation that distributes leftover fresh food from bakeries to the needy in Singapore.

Just like there are institutions complementing the conventional business – like the financial journals, the analysts and the schools – there is an opportunity for the daring to create parallel institutions to support the social enterprises of the world.

How about a stock market for the social enterprises in the world, where the stock price rises when the enterprise accomplishes a number of its goals towards a cause, be it eliminating malaria in Cambodia, or bringing peace to the Middle East?

And this can be supported with social analysts' ratings who scrutinise every move's impact on the social cause.

To date, there have been only a few individuals who have debated certain aspects of the current brand of capitalism we practise today.

Now, some nations are starting to defer. For example, Bhutan, despite being one of the poorest nations in the world, is one of the happiest.

In fact, the government there measures progress by Gross National Happiness, not GDP, which measures economic progress only. Surely, money is not the single pursuit that leads to happiness.

There is a social economy in existence that is in its infancy.

It is now up to the first-movers to capitalise on the opportunity and make hay while the sun shines.

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