



## Visionaries of social change

Social entrepreneurs are individuals who have innovative solutions to society's problems, writes Paul O'Hara.

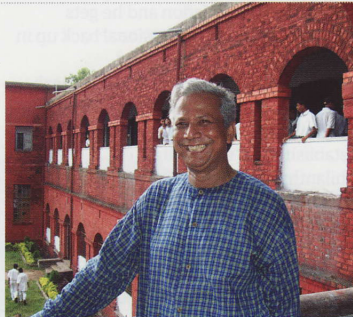
**S**ocial entrepreneurs have the same qualities as business entrepreneurs: vision, creativity, pragmatism, innovative ideas and determination. But the focus is social change rather than economic opportunity.

Maria Montessori, who developed the Montessori approach to early childhood education, was a social entrepreneur, as was Florence Nightingale, who is the founder of modern nursing. A modern day example is "banker for the poor" Muhammad Yunus, who recently won the Nobel Peace Prize for pioneering the micro credit movement - helping millions of the world's poorest people to access finance and lift themselves from poverty.

Rather than giving a fish, or teaching how to fish, social entrepreneurs change the fishing industry. They work in health, education, human rights, the environment and every other area of social concern. The leading social entrepreneurs can expect to change national policies and have their innovations independently replicated by other organisations locally and internationally. They can be found in increasing numbers in every country across the world. One of Ireland's most prolific social entrepreneurs is Sister Stanislaus Kennedy, founder of Focus Ireland, The Immigrant Council of Ireland, and co-founder of Young Social Innovators.

Bill Drayton, founder and CEO of Ashoka - World Leaders in Social Innovation is the pioneer of the social entrepreneurship movement. Drayton recognised the critical role and value of social entrepreneurs and the little support they received, and set about creating a global organisation in 1981 that uses venture capital methodology to identify, select and invest in high potential social entrepreneurs in the early stages of their careers. In the words of business entrepreneur Denis O'Brien: "Ashoka invented, refined and globally implemented an adaptation of business venture capital methods that finds and helps launch the best new social entrepreneurs and their ideas."

Ashoka's work has heightened awareness of the value of social entrepreneurs and inspired the creation of



Muhammad Yunus, who recently won the Nobel Peace Prize for pioneering the micro credit movement (photo by Hossain Toufique Iftekher)

many venture philanthropy organisations internationally investing in and supporting social entrepreneurs. Venture philanthropy uses some of the best practices of the venture capital world and value is measured in terms of social return on investment rather than financial return on investment. Social entrepreneurs represent attractive investment opportunities for those philanthropists looking for the highest impact.

E-bay founder Pierre Omidyar and founding president Jeff Skoll are leading the charge of business entrepreneurs, utilising venture philanthropy techniques to maximise their social impact through the Omidyar Network and Skoll Foundations respectively. Both organisations invest directly in high potential social entrepreneurs and work in partnership with organisations such as Ashoka to identify them.

"Philanthropy is all about making a positive difference in the world by devoting your resources and your time to causes you believe in," says Jeff Skoll. "In my case, I like to support causes where 'a lot of good comes from a little bit of good', or, in other words, where the positive social returns vastly exceed the amount of time and money invested. The mission of the Skoll Foundation is being realised through our support of social entrepreneurs and their innovative organisations."

In Ireland, there are three organisations investing in social entrepreneurs including Ashoka, Social Entrepreneurs Ireland and Ashoka Youth Venture. Ashoka identifies and invests in system changing social entrepreneurs with international potential -

Ashoka Fellows. Ashoka-SEI Fellows receive a three-year financial investment, an advisory council of entrepreneurial leaders, pro bono professional services from Ashoka partners such as McKinsey, Ogilvy and Arthur Cox, and access to a powerful global network of leading business and social entrepreneurs. Social Entrepreneurs Ireland (SEI) invests in pilot and early stage social entrepreneurs with potential for local and national impact, providing a one/two-year financial investment and access to powerful local networks of business and social entrepreneurs. Ashoka Youth Venture fosters young social entrepreneurs and supports with a small financial investment, mentoring and training.

The movement is flourishing in Ireland, but there must be an increase in the pool of leading social entrepreneurs who can devise solutions to social problems in a timely manner. With the right support, the problem/solution gap can be begin to be closed by bringing the innovations and organisations of leading social entrepreneurs from around the world to Ireland. The number of social entrepreneurs in society should be multiplied by getting every young person to practice changing society from an early age. Social entrepreneurs must be supported at all stages of their careers - the most obvious gaps at the moment being youth and scale up stages. The stories of social entrepreneurs inspire others to follow and the media have a critical role to play in telling these stories. The Irish Government must recognise where innovations are coming from and position itself to foster and support social entrepreneurs working in all fields. Finally, we must get increasing numbers of business entrepreneurs working with social entrepreneurs on society's most pressing problems.

The Ashoka Support Network (ASN) is for individuals who share the belief that entrepreneurs are the primary engine for economic and social development - individuals who have experience creating change and wish to apply this knowledge to philanthropic endeavours, who are frustrated with traditional philanthropic opportunities and wish to get involved in high impact social change. There is a growing network of ASN members in Ireland working with local and international social entrepreneurs, including Ashoka-SEI Fellows Caroline Casey and Tara Cunningham, who are spreading and scaling their important innovations. This is venture philanthropy at its most progressive. Paul O'Hara is director of Ashoka - World Leaders in Social Innovation ■