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# Fostering “Why not?” social initiatives – beyond business and governments

Henry Mintzberg and Guilherme Azevedo

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**Abstract:** In this article, we challenge the notion that complex and resilient problems – such as global warming and poverty – will have to be resolved by governments or responsible corporations. Instead, we argue for the potency of social initiatives promoted by communities of engaged people. A variety of experiences from around the world, and especially from Brazilians with their “Why not?” temperament, suggest characteristics of the origin, development, and diffusion of these initiatives. We conclude that social initiatives, by addressing local problems of a global nature, using networks connected across communities, may be the greatest hope for this troubled world.

## Introduction

That there are many difficult problems in this world is clear – global warming, poverty and starvation, a so-called recession that is probably more serious than anyone cares to admit, and much else. That we know how to resolve them is not.

We begin by challenging the two ways that have been most vigorously promoted: first, governments in general and the American government in particular, acting nobly on behalf of everyone else, and second, business, either indirectly, in the belief that economic development results in social development, or directly, through so-called ‘CSR’ (corporate social responsibility). Instead we argue for the potency of social initiatives, promoted by communities of engaged people, networked across the world, sometimes in

cooperation with businesses and governments. We are all aware of some of these, but do we appreciate how much more effective they can be than solutions promoted by governments and businesses?

We discuss several initiatives that are rendering major social change, to give a sense of their power, variety, and pervasiveness. Then we consider the initiatives from the one country that stands out in this regard, answering the question ‘Why Brazil?’ with ‘Why not Brazilians?’. The characteristics of these efforts enable us to speculate on the origin, development, and diffusion of social initiatives. We conclude that such initiatives may be required to deal with the difficult problems facing the world.

### **Social gridlock in government**

In his book *The Bubble of American Supremacy: Correcting the Misuse of American Power*, financier and philanthropist George Soros (2004) criticised the George W. Bush administration, and then proceeded to claim that the only hope for this world is an America come to its senses – a noble America, we might say, in place of nasty America. “*To regain the identity it enjoyed during the Cold War, the United States ought to become the leader of a community of democracies ... [It] would still need to retain its military might, but this strength would serve to protect a just world order*” (Soros 2004: 167–68). But will the American government in particular or governments in general, be the ones to deal with the most pressing problems in the world? Their record of late is not good.

Since the enactment of the Monroe Doctrine, the American record on such justice has been mixed, and while the rest of the world has come a long way since the Marshall Plan, so too, unfortunately, has the United States. Moreover, this country now appears to be in social gridlock, unable to resolve most of its own social problems.

Who, then, if not America? What other countries might have the influence, the insight, and the inclination to address global problems? The UK? France? Japan? Hardly. The emerging BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China)? The courage of some of them to challenge agricultural subsidies and

pharmaceutical patents has been encouraging, but can we expect them to make major movement on, for example, global warming? Then how about some of the apparently sensible smaller countries – for example Sweden or Costa Rica (without even an army)? Who will listen?

We believe that this is the wrong approach. Governments everywhere appear to be increasingly restricted, thanks to a steady shift in power toward forces for the status quo: powerful corporations, pervasive lobbying, political advertising. For better or for worse, many governments have also reduced their margin of manoeuvre by becoming tied to multilateral trade agreements, economic blocks, and common currencies. If influential feathers cannot be ruffled, then how are governments to deal with other than marginal problems? Hence the more serious the problem, the less we might expect it to be resolved by governments, at least taking the lead. Moreover, with power now rather evenly split between left and right in so many countries, they face social gridlocks of their own.

Witness the conference on global warming held in Copenhagen in 2009, much like those that followed. In the face of resistance from the established forces that have much to gain from the status quo, all that energy of the greater and lesser nations of the world massed against what may be the greatest threat to humankind came up with virtually nothing. The British minister for climate and energy (note the title) claimed that the process “*put numbers on the table*” Kanter (2009); China promised to reduce the rate of *increase* in its environmental contamination; and all parties agreed to review the empty accord in five years.

### **Business for the sake of business**

If not government, then who or what? Economists have long had a ready answer: business. Let business develop economically, and the rest of society will follow by developing socially. If this is true, then of course there is no need to restrict the growing power of the corporations. And so, even in the face of the

worst economic conditions since the great depression, caused in large part by the misbehaviour of many international corporations, globalisation proceeds largely without restrictions.

There is no doubt that we have to afford social development economically. But we also require economic development that does not undermine social development. On the issues we noted at the outset – global warming, poverty and starvation, the recession – arguably two and possibly the third are the *consequences* of economic development. That market forces will somehow correct these problems seems to be a fanciful idea at best. Thomas Friedman wrote in the *New York Times* on 19 December 2009 that “*The only engine big enough to impact Mother Nature is Father Greed: the market.*” It has Mr Friedman, but not as you wish.

The record on CSR has hardly kept up with the rhetoric. Noble business, if not noble America, is supposed to take us out of our messes. In their press releases, corporations look quite responsible; on the news pages, about oil spills and subprime mortgages and executive bonuses, many look rather different. Nonetheless, there are many responsible corporations, and we need more. But that their decent acts will resolve problems created by irresponsible others, or simply caused by the ubiquitousness of legal ‘externalities’, is difficult to believe. Witness the ‘clean coal’ advertising campaign in the United States, and ask yourself (a) how clean is that coal and, (b) how many dirty and “clean” coal plants were built around the world during that campaign.

Massed against CSR, in any event, is the prevailing dogma that business exists solely to serve its shareholders (leaving aside the message of its bonuses, that it seems really to serve its executives). The agenda of business is to serve itself, not the world. This is as it should be; at least so long as the world has ways to protect itself from the externalities of such activities. Unfortunately it does not: many corporations as well as other large institutions, including not-for-profits and governments, have become too large, too bureaucratic, too powerful, too exploitative, and too intertwined to be able to take the lead in dealing with our most serious social problems.

## **A movement of social initiatives**

If all of this is the bad news, then the good news is that there is another effort afoot, with many successes but far greater potential – as soon as it is fully recognised. We refer to social initiatives all around the world, many in unexpected places, carried out by significant numbers of ordinary people extraordinarily engaged. Consider, for example, *Médicins sans Frontières* (MSF, or Doctors without Borders), founded in 1971 by a few French doctors, known for its quick response to emergencies all over the world. Multiply this example by so many others: Alcoholics Anonymous, Greenpeace, open source software of various kinds, and so on.

A number of recent books have recognised these social movements. In *Blessed Unrest*, Paul Hawken wrote of perhaps a million or more organisations around the world working toward ecological sustainability and social justice: “*dispersed, inchoate, and fiercely independent*”, not “*liberal or conservative*” but “*a massive enterprise undertaken by involving citizens everywhere, not by self-appointed governments or hierarchy*” (Hawken 2007: 2–5). David Bornstein's (2007) book, *How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas*, offers a revealing glimpse of dozens of such initiatives, for example child protection in India, rural electrification in Brazil, and assistance to the disabled in Hungary. Alan Fowler and Kees Biekart, in *Civic Driven Change: Citizen's Imagination in Action* (2008), have edited a notable collection of essays on what they call civic-driven narratives, told by seriously engaged academics and practitioners. And in *Getting to Maybe: How the World is Changed* (2007), Westley, Zimmerman, and Patton probe into the core of some social initiatives, and the minds of social activists, to understand this process from the inside out.

## **Social initiatives around the world**

What do we mean by social initiatives? These are other ways of dealing with social problems, usually as collective actions intended to improve social conditions, even when executed in the economic or political

spheres (e.g., to increase employment or clean up political corruption). They usually begin in a single community, championed by one or several 'social entrepreneurs', and experiment with social changes that challenge what their members see as a dysfunctional status quo. Sometimes these people do so aggressively, but perhaps more commonly they work in benign, collaborative, and even initially unnoticed ways.

Much of this takes place, and especially is initiated, in the social sector. By this we mean in organisations and informal associations that are neither public (state-owned) nor conventionally private (whether closely or widely held by shareholders). Some are cooperatively-owned and organised (one-member, one-vote, which cannot be sold or transferred to others), but most are owned by no one (as in Greenpeace and Linux open source software). But they do tend to be rooted in communities, especially when starting up.

With this in mind, all kinds of famous initiatives can become apparent: from some seminal initiatives of last century, for example Mahatma Gandhi's civil disobedience movement and the ecological wake to save the whales from extinction, to the more recent electronic initiatives of Wikipedia and its many offshoots, and of the use of various forms of social media to catalyse and coordinate pro-democratic or alter-globalisation manifestations around the globe. We describe below three contemporary social initiatives, one each in Asia, Europe, and Africa, that have rendered significant social changes in their own worlds and exhibit the potential to diffuse beyond these worlds.

### **The micro-financing initiative in Bangladesh**

From southern Asia has come the micro-financing revolution started by Muhammad Yunus. In the mid-1970s, Bangladesh was in the grip of a famine, and Yunus, then head of the economics department at Chittagong University, started his own crusade against poverty. He realised that many families in poverty could attain a decent life if they had access to reasonable credit. Traditional banking was not an option because these people lacked the minimal qualifications (e.g., collateral, steady employment, formal credit history), and in any event the loans were usually too small for these banks to take on. People struggling to

survive, especially women culturally perceived as incapable or worthless, were often trapped in a vicious cycle of debt repayment to local middlemen, whose interest rates keep them in poverty.

Yunus was surprised to find that in many cases, a steady but tiny credit line could make a major difference. Learning from an initial loan of US\$27 to a group of 42 women – less than a dollar per person – he created the Grameen Bank ('Bank of the Villages', in Bengali), which offered small loans to groups, mainly of women, which provided their members with local support as well as the peer control needed to make good use of the money.

As a social initiative, the Grameen Bank did not just solve the immediate needs of many Bangladesh families; it changed their social structure. The idea spread. Today, the Grameen Foundation ([www.grameenfoundation.org](http://www.grameenfoundation.org)) supports more than 200 microfinance institutions operating in 38 countries.

### **The sustainable energy wind initiative in Denmark**

Denmark is the world leader in both the production of wind turbines and the percentage of wind-based electricity. During the last 30 years, the Danes have been able to grow their economy steadily while simultaneously reducing carbon and greenhouse gases emissions.

When the 1972 oil crisis hit Denmark, 90 per cent of its energy came from petroleum, most of it imported. The reaction to the crisis became a tipping point. The Danes began an energy conservation effort that did not stop when the energy crisis abated, not even when Denmark's North Sea oil and gas production made the country a net exporter. The government started looking for alternatives to fossil fuel, as the public pressured for diversification and rallied against nuclear energy, in favour of wind power, solar energy, and conservation. The Danish parliament raised taxes on the use of fossil-fuel energy, passed laws that subsidised technological development and production from alternative sources, and created long-term guarantees of viable prices for wind electricity.



This started the 'wind revolution'. Communities, families, and individuals actively participated by forming and buying shares in wind turbine cooperatives. This did not stop at wind. In Denmark, the development of green technologies for housing, industry, and transportation became almost a national sport. Danish cities and rural communities surprised the world (and even themselves) by their innovation and commitment. The rational use of wind, sun, biomass, wave power, and even some more unconventional sources (e.g., photovoltaic hydrogen plants and pork blubber-based industrial heating) allowed districts, islands, and small cities to become net exporters of clean energy and, in some cases, recover their investments in less than a decade.

The impetus for the Grameen Bank came from a single champion, in the social sector, while the wind power movement in Denmark, again rooted largely in the social sector in Nordic-style, saw both government and business playing key roles as well. The state-owned Riso National Laboratory, for example, initially created as a nuclear energy research centre, eventually became a centre for wind power development: the world leader in certification and testing of wind turbines and an active player in hydrogen fuel-cell research. In the private sector, Vestas, Denmark's leading wind turbine manufacturer, came to export about 90 per cent of its production.

### **The green belt initiative in Kenya**

The third initiative comes from Africa, with a champion who mobilised extensive support from the social sector and helped transform her country. Wangari Maathai, an environmentalist and political activist, was the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, in 2004, thanks to her courageous stand for environmental protection, democracy, and women's rights. Maathai was also the first woman to both earn a PhD and head a university department in Kenya. As chair of the National Council of Women of Kenya, she was approached by Wilhelm Elsrud, the executive director of the Norwegian Forestry Society, who was looking for a partner to start what would become the Green Belt Movement. Since 1977, this

movement has planted more than 40 million trees in twelve African countries and has become crucial in reversing degradation and protecting the soil.

In Maathai's words, although the movement was presented to the authorities as just an initiative to plant trees, in reality it was about planting ideas and giving people reasons to fight for citizenship, environment, and women rights. She has been charming enough to convince soldiers to take care of tree nurseries and plant trees. And she initiated protests against the construction of a 60-storey building in Uhuru Park in Nairobi that led to the preservation of the park, the liberation of political prisoners, and ultimately to the democratic transformation of the country.

This initiative has also led to the Green Belt Movement International and inspired a number of other programmes, including the United Nations 'Billion Tree Campaign' ([www.unep.org/billiontreecampaign](http://www.unep.org/billiontreecampaign)) that has resulted in the planting more than 10 billion trees around the world.

### **Social initiatives in Brazil**

As we travel around the world of social initiatives, there is one place that hosts a particularly fascinating array of them, perhaps more than any other country, at least in their novelty: Brazil. We discuss several of these initiatives, in order to ask the question: Why Brazil, or at least why Brazilians? And how can this happen elsewhere? We begin with description of two particularly interesting Brazilian initiatives, followed by mention of several others.

#### **The HIV/AIDS initiative**

In 1990, Brazil had almost twice as many cases of HIV/AIDS as South Africa. The World Bank predicted that 1,200,000 Brazilians would be infected by 2000. The international experts recommended that the Brazilian government focus on prevention and be prepared to lose a share of its population, because

treatment would be too expensive and ineffective. Brazilians saw it differently and decided to both treat and prevent.

The World Bank catastrophic forecasts proved to be accurate for South Africa – in 2000, one quarter of its population was infected – but not for Brazil: in ten years, the infection rate actually declined, to 0.6 per cent and, by the early 2000s, the country achieved universal treatment coverage. Indeed, about 40 per cent of the free drug treatments in the world at that time were provided in Brazil.

Containing and curbing the pandemic involved the health care community, various levels of government, local industry, the artistic community, the media, many local community movements (including catholic parishes, civic centres, samba associations, etc.), as well as associations advocating for a wide variety of minorities groups (homosexuals, prostitutes, drug users, haemophiliacs, captive-populations, Amerindians, etc.) Missing, however, were an identifiable leader, a general blueprint, and central coordination. In their place was a great deal of creative cooperation.

On the prevention side, humour was emphasised instead of fear, helped by a culture of open sexuality. The message of using condoms and living with HIV was included in the plots of popular soap operas and in the preaching of Catholic churches (despite the Vatican pressuring against it). Millions of condoms were distributed all year around, but especially during carnivals. The effort also included the recruitment of volunteers in high-risk groups (prostitutes, homosexuals, intravenous drug addicts, and prisoners), some with the virus, to adapt and spread the main messages concerning transmission, prevention, and solidarity toward those under treatment.

On the treatment side, health care specialists together with volunteers developed local solutions to distribute and, very importantly, make sure that those under treatment, including people who were illiterate or living alone, were able to follow the complex medication schedule.

Once public opinion had pushed the government to make treatment universal, Brazilians took bold moves on many fronts. Unable to convince pharmaceutical multinationals to reduce the price of antiretroviral drugs, and facing American threats of economic sanctions and punitive tariffs, the ministry of health, supported by a clause in Brazilian industrial property law that limited rights in cases of ‘national emergency’, ordered federal research laboratories to develop the necessary technology and granted compulsory licenses to produce the medications locally. Eventually, surprised by the laboratories' success in synthesising the drugs, major multinational pharmaceutical companies agreed to negotiate royalty rights. When, in 2001, the United States challenged Brazil's compulsory licensing at the World Trade Organization, Brazil responded in the United Nations Human Rights Commission, pushing for a vote on AIDS treatment as a human right. This vote passed with a 52-0 majority, the US being the only country to abstain.

In this initiative, we see a strong interplay among many layers of government, the public, industry, and a myriad of organisations in the social sector. Of special note is how the Brazilian government, pushed by its own population to take courageous positions internationally, was able to challenge the established forces of industry and WTO. This, together with determined, imaginative, and cooperative efforts within the country, helped change the discourse and practice of the fight against HIV/AIDS in many other countries around the world.

### **The bioethanol initiative**

Our second example from Brazil is different in some respects, involving more interaction between government and businesses, and looking more like a case of *dirigisme* – borrowing the concept from the French tradition of government directing industrial development – than an emergent social initiative, at least in its initial incarnation.

This energy shift also began after the 1972 oil crisis. The Brazilian government (then a military dictatorship) was concerned about external dependence on oil. In 1975, it created *Pró-Álcool*, a bold,

large-scale ethanol programme to produce biofuel from sugarcane, distribute it to all gas stations in the country, and use it in cars equipped with a technology that was not yet established. The government offered tax incentives to sugarcane farmers and ethanol plants, while it imposed a new tax on gasoline to subsidise bioethanol. Surprisingly, it worked, and in less than ten years about 95 per cent of new cars in Brazil were ethanol vehicles.

In the late 1980s, however, the programme lost force due to a combination of factors: the national economy was under the grip of hyperinflation, the international price of oil was low, Petrobras' development of deepwater production reduced Brazil's dependence on foreign oil, and the international price of sugar had increased rapidly. Many denounced the bio-ethanol programme as too expensive. Consumers, experiencing shortages at the pump, stopped buying bio-ethanol cars and even started converting their existing cars to run on gasoline.

In the late 1990s, the programme regained force, this time fuelled by rising ecological concerns among the public, and helped by renewed economic stability and a technological innovation: the 'flexfuel' car, provided by automobile companies that could run on gas alone, ethanol, or any mix of the two. Now more than 90 per cent of the cars sold in Brazil are flexfuel. The consumers makes the choice every time they stop at the pump (but all automobile gasoline sold in Brazil contains 20–25 per cent of ethanol).

Sugarcane ethanol represents a serious alternative for countries with tropical agriculture potential and, so far, Brazil has begun official collaborative efforts with Ghana, Mozambique, Angola, and Kenya.

This second initiative in Brazil saw a strong role by government in getting it started, yet an eventual stall due to changed conditions as well as, perhaps, the insufficient rooting of the initiative in community. And when it did get going again, community and industry played a greater role.

To consider this initiative together with that in Denmark, while the word's elite fiddled in the halls of Copenhagen, in the rest of Denmark and throughout Brazil people were making machines and growing

crops and pumping fuel that were changing their world. This has much further to go, but imagine the human energy that could be unleashed by opening up the spirit of such initiatives.

### **Other initiatives in Brazil**

Many other initiatives have come out of Brazil. The experiments in participatory municipal budgeting in Porto Alegre, started in 1989, have been adapted in more than 200 municipalities in Latin-America and around the world. Since the late 1980s, Brazil has tested and implemented a collection of measures for combating poverty, including the *bolsa-familia*, a programme that grants mothers a monthly allowance if their children attend school and keep a required schedule of medical visits and vaccinations. This has not only reinforced education and alleviated poverty, but it has also brought enhanced women empowerment, the economic revival of isolated communities, and a reduction in rural exodus.

Started elsewhere but with major impetus in Brazil, the so-called 'Liberation Theology' – local parish activism with precepts of Marxism that has brought it into conflict with the Vatican – has helped form what some consider to be the most powerful social movement in Brazil, the 'Landless Workers' Movement' (or MST: *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*). With some 1.5 million members and under the assumption, arguably supported by the Brazilian constitution, that unproductive land should be confiscated and redistributed, this controversial social movement promotes a sort of bottom-up land reform based on beliefs in social inclusion (adult education, cooperative farming, political representation, etc.).

### **“Why not?” Brazilians**

We should ask: as a particularly fertile soil for social initiatives, “Why Brazil?”, or more accurately “Why Brazilians?” Appreciation of the answers may help to encourage more of this kind of venturing elsewhere in the world.

Westley, Patton, and Zimmerman (2007) point out that the tipping point for the embarkation of a social initiative is “*getting to maybe*”, meaning that a decisive part of the process is in the minds of the social entrepreneurs, to get to the point of believing that the change is possible. In a similar vein, perhaps the most important answer to “Why Brazil?” is that Brazilians are a “Why not?” people. In other words, they seem to be predisposed to this kind of maybe.

As opposed to the mentality that has to ask “Why?” each time something new is proposed, the “Why not?” mentality says, “Sure, let's try it. If it fails, we'll try something else”. Since each social initiative is novel when it is first developed – a venture into uncharted territory – it has to be worked out as the protagonists proceed: their strategy, if you like, has to emerge through a learning process. The Brazilians' advantage may be in feeling no shame in trying and failing – they just move on. (When French President Charles de Gaulle allegedly declared that Brazil was not a serious country, rather than being insulted, most Brazilians were amused, even proud.)

Brazilian vocabulary is indicative of this spirit. Popular expressions are *dar um jeitinho*, meaning to find a way around; *quebrar um galho*, literally to break a branch and so create a way through, and *sem medo de ser feliz*, literally “with no fear of being happy”, meaning to go ahead without the fear of failing and despite risks and difficulties. These reflect the large repertoire of practices to negotiate alternative ways to circumvent rules, maintain optimism, and overcome difficulties. And this, of course, encourages social activism, which inevitably challenges if not breaks the established rules. In Brazil, if you are working for a good cause, why not?

Why this “Why not?” attitude in Brazil? It may be interesting to speculate on this in order to appreciate how it can be fostered elsewhere.

### **Peaceful pride**

Brazil is a vast country, the fifth largest in the world, with a language that isolates it from its neighbours, let alone from almost all the rest of the world. That, coupled with the absence of any serious war or border dispute for a century and a half, and a past of having ‘colonised itself’ in a sense (following a colonial history, Brazil gained its independence in 1822, just after being the capital of the Portuguese empire for some 13 years), has helped to breed a certain independence, confidence, and pride, manifested in a go-it-alone mentality.

Brazil is a civilization-under-construction, full of freshness and brashness, much like the United States of earlier times. A colleague of ours, Rennie Nilsson, described the Brazilian response to the HIV/AIDS challenge as a confidence of intentions and humility of means, exactly the opposite, he said, of what had been coming out of the World Bank.

### **Unified eclecticism**

Brazil is a land of contrasts: black/white/indigenous; north/south; coast/inland; rich/poor, etc. Yet, on the racial front at least, this is a country in which the races have mixed rather extensively. The Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre, in the 1930s formulated the thesis of “Lusotropicalism”, which claimed that the Portuguese colonisation was characterised by the absence of pride for any specific race and therefore created a more equalitarian society. This may be a difficult thesis to defend – there is racism in Brazil, and the sinister shadow of past slavery – but miscegenation did become celebrated as a defining element of the Brazilian identity.

Today there is a particular sort of eclecticism in Brazil, with broad acceptance of a unified national identity. There are no hyphenated Brazilians, as in ‘French-Canadians’ or ‘Afro-Americans’ (although the African influence on Brazilian cultural has been particularly significant, as we discuss next).

### **Connected humanism**



Brazilians culture is more African than Iberian when it comes to joy, movement, and colour. Being in touch with movement, dance, and sound, Brazilians become in touch with each other: they communicate intensely in verbal and non-verbal ways. And so there is a marked tendency in the country to emphasise human relations and caring, as is evident in the *telenovelas* (soap operas), Brazil's gift to much of the world. Moreover, networking and negotiating comes naturally to Brazilians, even among those with highly opposed beliefs. This fosters the kind of creative solutions so necessary for successful initiatives of a social nature. The spirit of these points was captured wonderfully well by Chico Mendes, the Brazilian environmentalist martyr: *“At first, I thought I was fighting to save rubber trees, then I thought I was fighting to save the Amazon rainforest. Now I realize I am fighting for humanity.”*

### **The characteristics of successful social initiatives**

Drawing this discussion of Brazilians together with our earlier examples of social initiatives, we can begin to see what appears to make social initiatives successful. We discuss this in three steps: their origins, their development, and their diffusion.

### **Origins in confidence, courage, and community**

The Brazilian experiences, and the others discussed earlier, point to a deep confidence in being able to tackle complex issues, and the courage to break away from the status quo, often initially independently of the established forces of government and business, sometimes in opposition to them. This was the case when Yunus learnt that microfinance could emancipate poor Bangladeshis and when Maathai discovered that she could plant trees and ideas at the same time. In other words, the origins of such initiatives appear to be not usually in the mainstream so much as in what our colleague Margaret Graham has called “the active periphery”.

The bioethanol initiative in Brazil might seem like an exception to this, having been started by a government in power. But it also happened in a country that could be described as on the active periphery.

And the fact that this initiative could not sustain itself the first time around suggests our final characteristic of initiation, namely that social initiatives seem to take root best when embedded in community (as did that in Denmark). Social initiatives thus seem to be essentially indigenous: they work from the ‘inside up’, and out, by people collectively engaged. They are not solving the world's problems so much as their own, later to discover that their own problems *are* the world's problems.

This may help to explain a difference between Brazil and the United States. There is no shortage of social initiatives in the United States – de Toqueville pointed to them two centuries ago – and what better recent example than the first Obama presidential campaign, so embedded in communities. But proportionally, Brazil seems now to be more active in this regard, perhaps because of the intense focus in the United States on entrepreneurship of an individual and commercial nature. This may make for an energetic economy of business enterprises, but not a correspondingly energetic culture of social initiatives. (Would de Toqueville be as impressed with American non-commercial associations today?)

### **Development through entrepreneurship and learning, in the social sector and beyond**

Social initiatives require leadership, but not as conventionally conceived in business and government. There may be a prime mover, such as a Yunus in Bangladesh or a Maathai in Kenya, but that leadership is deeply embedded in ‘communityship’: these are not lone wolves issuing calls to arms, let alone conventional entrepreneurs building their private empires, but *social* entrepreneurs. Indeed, often several of them work in concert, and sometimes so many, as in the case of Danish wind power or the Brazilian fight against HIV/AIDS, that none is easily identifiable as *the* leader.

Whether or not there is an individual with a vision, development is above all a learning process, involving experimentation, adaptability, and spontaneity. How else to break new ground, challenge an existing status quo? Development therefore has to be worked out, very much in the Brazilian spirit of finding the way around.

Strategy in much of the West is perceived as developed in a process of deliberate planning: the head ‘formulates’ so that the rest of the body can ‘implement’. But where is the learning when the body cannot feed back its experiences to the head? In contrast, scratch almost any interesting strategy, in business and out, and you will find a process of emergent learning. IKEA's famous strategy of selling unassembled furniture came about because a worker had to take the legs off to get a table into his car. “If us, why not our customers too?!”

That is why the conventional bureaucracies of business and government have so much trouble with social initiatives, even to accept them. Their predisposition to top-down, leader-led planning and analysing and measuring – essentially “Why?” processes – are not conducive to open-ended and creative learning in community. Where such efforts do take root in businesses or governments, they may well be in obscure corners, so-called ‘skunkworks’, with their own social champion(s).

Make no mistake about it: such learning can be a long and difficult process, requiring extensive dedication on the part of many people working together. That is why community is so important, and doggedness too. Many social initiatives do fail, and even those that succeed typically require great patience to overcome a succession of obstacles.

As suggested, we see the social sector, beyond the public and private sectors, comprising all sorts of so-called NGOs, not-for-profits, cooperatives, etc. – perhaps we should call it the ‘plural sector’ – as key to the development of social initiatives (see Cheng and Mohamed [2010](#) who describe social initiatives as part of a larger – and diverse – ‘social ecosystem’).

It does not mean that all initiatives coming from this sector are positive. Without getting into the merits of different moralities, social initiatives are not inherently good, and some may create more problems than solutions, when, for instance, they are marked by corruption, bad intentions, and prejudice. If the public sector can be crude, and the private sector crass, then the plural sector can be closed – at the limit

xenophobic. But the best of its social initiatives are exactly the opposite: they throw major opportunities wide open, to everyone.

The examples that we have presented also include the involvement of businesses and governments in many social initiatives: eventually these key institutions of society cannot be excluded. So collaboration across all three sectors is often critical for success. We have, of course, seen examples of these institutions taking the lead, but rarely without the deep involvement of the plural sector. So-called PPPs – public-private-partnerships – can be appropriate, but with two qualifications: first, these should often be PPPPs – plural-public-private-partnerships; and second neither business nor government can dominate, bearing in mind that the greatest PPP the world has seen is the American military-industrial-complex.

But to get established initially, many social initiatives need to keep their distance from the forces of the establishment: they need to maintain their activities on the periphery, at least for a while. And that requires the confidence and courage discussed earlier, as well as communities to protect them.

### **Diffusion through networks across communities**

Combing these last two points, while businesses and governments can be involved in development, sometimes the learning has to be more or less complete before they can play what is perhaps their key role: in helping to diffuse the initiatives, from its original community to others, sometimes around the world. In other words, development can require incubation; only when the initiative is reasonably well-defined can businesses and governments join in a major way, for diffusion.

In this third stage, of diffusion, the planning and the analysing and the measuring of governments and businesses may be more necessary (although not to the point of stifling the initiative), because of the limited informal resources of the social sector institutions championing the initiative. Put differently after the formal “Why not?” have proved themselves, comes the time for some of the “Whys?” to render the initiative more operational.

Modern technologies are now providing an enormous impetus in helping to diffuse social activities beyond their original communities, as events throughout the Middle East in early 2011 made clear. Indeed we believe that the basic thesis of this article is supportable because of these technologies: they are changing the world of social development, alongside political activism.

Perhaps the world first became aware of this during the protests at the WTO meeting in Seattle in 1999, when contemporary forms of communication were used to rally groups into collaborative action. If anyone missed that, the first Obama presidential campaign made clear the power of electronic communication across networks, with Obama himself on that ubiquitous Blackberry.

Networks are not communities: their relationships are thinner, more superficial (try asking your 500 Facebook friends to help you move to a new apartment). But networks do link communities, and electronic networks have enormous potential to inform and synchronise communities all over the world about the processes and potentials of new social initiatives. It allowed, for instance, a few people in Sydney to start a movement in 2007 that encouraged some 2.2 million others to turn out the lights for an hour, in order to draw attention to energy use. A year later, 50 million people across 35 countries joined this 'Earth Hour'. The microfinance banks inspired by the Grameen Bank spread across Asia in the early 1980s in less than a decade; that would have been unimaginable in the 1880s, yet would it even take six years today?

People everywhere are looking for solutions to their difficult social problem. While each culture is different, a great deal can be learned from the solutions worked out somewhere else. Windmills developed in Denmark can turn in Dakar; micro-financing conceived in Dhaka has created investments in Queens, New York (where, as Muhammad Yunis reported in a speech in São Paulo in November 2008, there were people in the shadow of Wall Street who couldn't even open a bank account); and Africans have been learning from Brazilians about dealing with the crisis of HIV/AIDS. Modern forms of communication, as well as of transportation, can provide enormous help in diffusion, with the world today experiencing its

own minstrels on the internet, who sing the songs that carry the stories of social initiatives from one community to another.

You don't have to be a “Why not?” society to learn from one. Once an initiative has been worked out in one place, with established credibility, it can be applied elsewhere. Of course, it will need adapting to local conditions, and the world will in fact work better if each new adaptor improves the initiative and diffuses that new learning back. But just crossing borders is plenty. As Paul Farmer, the American anthropologist and physician, has commented: “*Many political borders serve as semipermeable membranes, often quite open to diseases and yet closed to the free movement of cures*” (Farmer 1999: 55). This no longer need be the case.

### **Impeding and proceeding**

“Somebody ought to do something about that”. How often have we heard this refrain? We have generally taken it to mean somebody in government (in places like Canada and France) or in business (in places like the United States).

In its 12 August 2010 issue, *The Economist* (2010) ran a long article on ‘social innovation’. It is worth reading as a primer on how to discourage significant social innovation.

The article acknowledged the social sector, but defined it rather strangely (“*public services plus charity*”, at best with “*businesslike ideas*”), and then described it as dependent on the initiatives and support of the public sector as well as the heroic leadership and top-down strategies and financial incentives so commonly favoured in the private sector. The article also claimed that “*social entrepreneurship does not yet have a Microsoft or a Google*”. (The editors might wish to check the employment of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement [[www.redcross.int](http://www.redcross.int)], let alone its 97 million members and volunteers.) But “*with encouragement from the state [,] social entrepreneurs' best ideas can be spread faster and wider*”. Does this describe the development of the Red Cross, or of micro-financing?

This article discussed society as being “*on the threshold of the fourth stage of how it addresses its thorniest problems*” (the first three being families and charities, the welfare state, and public-private-partnerships through competitive outsourcing). In this fourth stage, “*government will tap the ability of the private sector, for-profit and non-profit*”, to deliver “*disruptive, transformative innovation*”. To do this, government can host competitions, offer “*cash prizes*”, “*measure the social impact of public spending*”, and find ways to involve “*private capital [...] to bring rigour*” to all this. By taking “*a businesslike approach*” that this magazine has dubbed “*philanthrocapitalism*” – an oxymoronic mouthful – investors can “*take a close interest in the growth of [non-profit] groups and measure their performance obsessively*”.

Needless to say, we believe that the world has had enough of this dysfunctional obsessiveness. “*If we always do as we always did, we will always get what we always got*”. This is the case in this article, with many of its prescriptions sounding like the failed practices of the private and public sectors, while it seeks to maintain the marginalisation of the social sector – ensuring its dependence on the public sector while continuing to ape the private sector.

The somebody who will do something about our problems has to be you, and us. Once we all get past the belief that business or government will do it, to an understanding that in today's world, all too often both are the problem more than the solution, then we will be able to arrive at the realisation that the solutions lie in us.

In a *New York Times* column in February 2009, Thomas Freidman wrote that “*Somewhere in the back of their minds, a lot of people seem to be realizing that the alternative to a United States-dominated world [...] is a leaderless world*”. No, we have had more than enough of this kind of leadership, thank you, for centuries, even before the United States was founded. In today's world, this attitude fosters hubris, not learning, imposition, not problem solving. In the front of all our minds has to be the understanding that if our world is to deal with its escalating problems, all of us who care about these problems more than we

care about our own cosy arrangements will have to take the lead, as communities networked together.

Why not?

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