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BOOK REVIEW

Christian Seelos and Johanna Mair: Innovation and Scaling for Impact. How Effective Social Enterprises Do It.

A favourite example of a social innovation which has made a successful journey to scale is Parkrun, the running initiative launched in 2004 by Paul Sinton-Hewitt in a London park. Rooted in a commitment to basic principles (five kilometre weekly runs, volunteer-led, free to join) and harnessing technology to maximise efficiency, Parkrun has since spread to nineteen other countries and is enjoyed by an army of over three million runners across the globe. Counter-intuitively, a key success measure for Parkrun is that the global average run time should come *down* each week, as this is an indicator that more inactive people are taking part and becoming active, in service of a mission to create a healthier happier world (Parkrun, 2018).

For every Parkrun, there are likely dozens of social ventures frustratingly unable to spread the impact of what works locally for them, and this has led to interest from academics and practitioners in how the process of scaling up might best be undertaken, and what external and internal factors might be critical to its success (see, for example, Dees, Anderson and Wei-Skillern, 2004, or Leadbeater, 2009).

With *Innovation and Scaling for Impact: How Effective Social Enterprises Do It*, Christian Seelos and Johanna Mair offer an insightful and theory-rich contribution to the academic literature on this

topic, based on their work with social enterprises over a decade or more. In particular, they explore the history of innovation and scaling in four organisations based in India and Bangladesh, each of which is used to shed light on a particular approach to the process.

The four case studies of these organisations form the central core of Seelos and Mair's book, sandwiched between a theoretical introduction (mapping out what the authors call "innovation pathologies"), and a guide to practical actions for organisations and their supporters.

Anyone working with, or studying, social enterprises, or almost any other field of business, will be weary of what is described here as the lack of "a shared and consistent understanding of what innovation means" (p. 19). Frustrated by a weak knowledge base on social sector innovation the authors attempt to create their own framework, wherein innovation is no longer seen as a universal panacea, but something that can deliver success, or failure, or anything in between. Adapting Drucker's theory of the business (1994), they argue that the *purpose* of innovation in social enterprise is the creation of social impact, and its *success* depends on three interlinked factors: understanding the societal problem or social need; internal capability; and a strong sense of mission and strategy. Importantly, innovation is shown as only one way to increase impact, and one with a high degree of uncertainty and risk, in comparison to scaling of existing activity.

This framework—with its red zone of uncertainty and innovation, and green zone of scaling routine ideas—allows for organisations (and in the social sector, funders) to assess opportunities and ideas in terms of their potential to create impact.

The case studies use this innovation vs. scaling lens to examine four organisations in some depth:
- Gram Vikas (a non-governmental organisation which works with tribal communities in India and Africa)
- Aravind (an eye care and treatment social enterprise in India)
- BRAC (a large humanitarian non-governmental organisation based in Bangladesh)
- Waste Concern (a social business also founded and based in Bangladesh)

A real strength of the book is the tracking of these organisations over time, allowing the authors to examine how different approaches may be appropriate in the life cycle of a social venture. For example, we follow Gram Vikas from its early period, with rapid and often unsuccessful innovation (due to a lack of clarity on impact and strategy), to a mature state, which enables the enterprise to focus ruthlessly on scaling successful ventures with minimal innovation. As a matter of fact, it is clear that the early drive to innovate, despite its failures and the consequent loss of key leaders, was what allowed Gram Vikas to gain such a rich understanding of their beneficiaries' needs and of the approach which would work best for them.

This journey, based on what the authors call "innovation as learning" is contrasted with that of the other organisations to compare different combinations of scaling and innovation. With Aravind, the approach is described as "innovation in support of scaling", whereby innovation happens, at regular intervals, to solve particular problems. However, the red zone nature of this innovation is reduced by a robust approach to knowledge management and risk reduction, and the disciplined

organisational culture (present for most of Aravind's history) generated by the "hard, dedicated, focused work of creating impact for thousands of patients every day" (p. 116).

Meanwhile BRAC ("innovation and scaling for transformative impact") has successfully innovated multiple interventions with its beneficiaries, enabling it to transform people's lives in a manner that would have been impossible with just one or two. This process is supported by strategic focus (not innovating for the sake of it, or because a funder wants them to) and by a recognition that distinct competencies relating to innovation and scaling are required among BRAC's management cadre.

Finally, Waste Concern ("innovation that enables diffusion of proven ideas") chooses to spread innovation by teaching and consultancy to other organisations in the field. They research and evaluate new ideas, and then present tested solutions to others who can effectively scale the impact by proxy.

These four "innovation archetypes", exemplified by the four case study organisations, are compared in more detail in the book's final section, in which the authors also go on to examine what they call "problem spaces", the environmental backdrop in which innovation and scaling endeavours occur. It is the barriers (economic, cognitive, normative or political) which exist in these spaces, as much as internal capability, that can inhibit a social enterprise from reaching its potential.

The success of the authors consists in the depth of their study. To trace the history of innovation and scaling in four organisations over their entire lifespan allows great insight into success factors and inhibitors, and the theory generated from this insight is an important step in our understanding of the processes of innovation and scaling in social ventures.

One shortcoming is, perhaps inevitably, that an unrelenting focus on the organisation as the locus for scaling and innovation underplays the importance of the contexts in which the organisations themselves are embedded. Additionally, there could have been an exploration of the insight from previous quantitative work on scaling, such as that by Weber, Leibniz and Demirtas (2015), looking at various strategic approaches to growing impact across Europe.

However, while the *arena* for this book is the Indian sub-continent, its *approach* is applicable elsewhere. To revisit our Parkrun example, focussing on the green zone of scaling what has worked, rather than tinkering in the red zone of innovation, has proved incredibly successful, something which may come as no surprise to social entrepreneurs, but is, perhaps, worth emphasising to those policy makers and funders who sometimes let their love of social innovation run away with them.

References

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