

Have you ever seen the Bollywood film, “Pad Man”? The 2018 film is based on the life of Arunachalam Muruganantham, an Indian man who has worked relentlessly to provide women living in rural localities with access to low-cost sanitary pads as well as a pathway to gainful self-employment. His mission took shape when he discovered that his wife, Shanti, was using dirty rags during her period as the cost of purchasing imported sanitary pads was too high and there was a feeling of shame surrounding the purchase of pads from the male-dominant pharmacies. Arunachalam learned that his wife was not alone, that the majority of the women in his city of Coimbatore faced similar financial struggles and a social stigma, leading them to use unsanitary rags, leaves, newspapers, ashes and sand during their periods - a health risk that could lead to “reproductive tract infections” (Sandhana, 2012). Arunachalam saw a critical social need, a gap, an opportunity, and he addressed it. In pursuit of his mission, he was ostracized – his wife and his mother both left him and his sisters and community shunned him and regarded him as crazy – but that didn’t deter him. After having little success in soliciting feedback from the products he created, he took it upon himself to wear women’s underwear and strap a “bladder-and-tube” device filled with goat’s blood to test his prototypes (Sandhana, 2012). His breakthrough invention came after several years of tinkering, and today, more than 1300 machines have been created by his start-up company, Jayaashree Industries. Arunachalam ensured that, through the help of bank loans and support groups, women were able to purchase these machines so that they could have a “sustainable livelihood” and have healthier, more dignified lives (*Welcome to New Inventions – Jayaashree Industries*, 2014). Arunachalam is not only a proud “Pad Man,” he is the epitome of what it means to be a social entrepreneur.

Social entrepreneurship is a solutions-oriented process that aims to improve the social welfare of a group of people, a process that effectively shifts a status quo, even slightly. Like

Arunachalam Muruganatham, social entrepreneurs are agents of change who work outside of, inside of, and alongside systems riddled with challenges and injustices. Social entrepreneurship involves questioning social constructs, imagining new realities, and traversing hierarchies that prioritize short-term goals and “top-down” decision-making. Social entrepreneurs seek to create sustainable conditions where people thrive and not merely survive. “Sustainable” is a key term here as innovations that cultivate resiliency are of greater value than those that create dependency and fail to serve people in the long-run.

To measure and evaluate the work of social entrepreneurs, it is paramount to go beyond quantitative data, which is often easier to measure but inadequately depicts social impact on its own. Through my experience as an AmeriCorps educator, I have learned first-hand how numbers can be misleading, how a quantifiable short-term output may look promising but how the long-term impact is neglected. The college preparatory high school I served at prided itself on the number of its students that were accepted into college each year; however, what they failed to mention was the number of students who had to repeat years of college, take extra classes, and drop out because they were inadequately prepared. Numbers were prioritized over qualitative data – stories, testimonials, focus groups, surveys, school pride, alumni engagement, career check-ups, cultural relevancy – and the true impact of education was disregarded. To be clear, the school administrators were not social entrepreneurs, and that was part of the problem, as they were exclusively focused on short-term results.

While measuring social impact takes time – it is worth it. As it can take several years to evaluate the impact of the work of social entrepreneurs, it can be beneficial to use checkpoints to “assess their progress against a theory of change” (Bornstein & Davis, 2010, p. 66). Doing so provides an opportunity to determine what steps in their process are successful and what steps

need to be adjusted in order to achieve the intended impact. The social return on investment (“SROI” - measured by dividing the benefits derived from an initiative by the costs) is another approach to use, albeit a more quantitative one. For instance, the SROI of the Milwaukee County Housing First program is: $2.1\text{m (reduced Medicaid costs)} + 715\text{k (reduced mental health costs)} + 600\text{k (reduced legal costs)} / 2\text{m (overall costs of the program)} = 1.71$ (*Milwaukee County Housing First*). The limitation of this number is that it doesn’t tell a social story, at least not on its own. To this end, can a SROI measure the benefits of stability and joy from being housed versus the costs of displacement and pain from not?

Social entrepreneurs are bridge-builders, serving as connectors between community members, nonprofit agencies, and government officials. As they provide links and solutions, they should be invested in financially (as social entrepreneurship is an inherently unstable career path) and through increased media exposure (as media largely focuses on problems and not solutions). President Barack Obama helped to legitimize the importance of social entrepreneurship when he created the Office of Social Innovation. This may prove to be one of the greatest examples of investments we, as a society, can continue to make in social entrepreneurs – to create space for them to collaborate, as great work cannot occur in isolation.

From working as the Supportive Housing Associate at United Methodist Children’s Services (UMCS), I have learned about how criminal records and eviction histories can prevent people from securing housing. It is abysmal for people to have to navigate through life with a black mark on them, in perpetuity. While it is possible in extremely limited cases for people to have a criminal record expunged or an eviction dispute resolved, I am not aware of any process that exists for people to have the opportunity to have a clean-slate, not by chance, but through effort. I’ve been reflecting on the value of volunteerism/community service and how hopefully in

the future it can be a way for people to clear their records. In this reality, people with a criminal and/or eviction history can perform a certain number of service hours to have their records expunged. It wouldn't be easy and the hours would be scaled accordingly, but it would be an opportunity for people to have agency to start anew and be in charge of their futures. After all, restorative justice shouldn't be mere words but an ideal to live by.

References

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