

psychologists, and the like. And, increasingly, businesses need employees and managers who appreciate the social and environmental dimensions of their work and who can spot opportunities to collaborate with this "other" entrepreneurial sector.

It is important to keep in mind how new these changes are. As recently as twenty years ago, the citizen sector was tightly restricted in most of the world. Social entrepreneurs encountered extraordinary political constraints and they had few identifiable structural supports or networks to turn to for financing, information, or encouragement. In many cases, they faced formidable opposition even within their own families. Even in countries with long histories of citizen organization, such as the United States, until recently relatively few people imagined that they could pursue a career in this sector. Now it is common for graduates of top U.S. universities to do so. Indeed, for anyone who has ever said, "This isn't working" or "We can do better!"—for anyone who gets a kick out of challenging the status quo, shaking up the system, or practicing a little entrepreneurial "creative destruction"—these are propitious times.

## From Little Acorns Do Great Trees Grow

Every change begins with a vision and a decision to take action. In 1978, an American named Bill Drayton, the assistant administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, decided to establish an organization to support leading social entrepreneurs around the world. The idea had been brewing in the back of his mind for fifteen years.

Drayton's idea was to search the world for individuals with fresh ideas for social change who combined entrepreneurial ability and strong ethical fiber.

Drayton, then thirty-five, was looking for people with compelling visions who possessed the creativity, savvy, and determination to realize their ideas on a large scale: people who would, in his words, leave their "scratch on history." As he conceived of it, building an organization that could find these wildflowers and help them grow would be the most "highly leveraged" approach to social change possible. It would be the single most powerful thing he could do to speed up development and democratization around the globe. To this end, Drayton set out like a modern-day explorer to map the world's social terrain in search of its most talented changemakers.

Today, the organization that he established—*Ashoka: Innovators for the Public*—operates in forty-six countries across Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Central Europe and has assisted 1,400 social entrepreneurs, providing them with close to \$40 million in direct funding, analyzing their strategies, offering "professional" services, and—by virtue of Ashoka's reputation for selectivity—lending credibility to their efforts.

Ashoka works a little like a venture capital firm. It seeks high yields from modest, well-targeted investments. However, the returns it seeks are

not in profits, but in advances in education, environmental protection, rural development, poverty alleviation, human rights, healthcare, care for the disabled, care for children at risk, and other fields.<sup>1</sup>

Like Bill Drayton, Ashoka is a lean organization that punches well above its weight. Its 120 staff members have assembled a global network that includes thousands of nominators and supporters who search regularly in their countries for people who will cause major, positive system change: who will become “references in their fields,” who will “set or change patterns” at the national and international levels.

This book chronicles the efforts of some of these people. It tells the stories of leading social entrepreneurs in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the United States (most of whom were identified through Ashoka’s network) as well as some other individuals who are no longer living but whose ideas are very much alive in the world, such as Florence Nightingale and James P. Grant.

Numerous organizations identify and support social entrepreneurs today, but I have chosen to use Ashoka as a vehicle to trace the emergence of social entrepreneurship because it is the only organization that has been actively monitoring this phenomenon at the global level for more than twenty years. Additionally, its “search and selection” process remains the most rigorous system I have come across for identifying pattern-setting innovators at relatively early stages in their careers. In a story with strands that extend into many lands, Bill Drayton is like the spider at the center of the web. And so, it is fitting that we begin with him.

Bill Drayton looks like someone you might expect to find in a library on a Saturday night. He is inordinately thin. He wears out-of-fashion suits, thick glasses, and wallabies. His hair is limp, his skin a little pale, his tie generally askew. Yet his eyes convey a sense of excitement about life, a seemingly boundless fascination with the world that is reminiscent of a young child’s curiosity. This quality is counterbalanced by a highly conservative deportment. Drayton has the manners of a Victorian gentleman. When greeting someone, he offers a courtly three-quarter bow. When indicating the way, he extends his arm in the manner of a butler. He seems constitutionally incapable of passing through a doorway first. And he speaks in soft, patient tones, having been taught by his parents that to speak loudly is to imply that what you have to say is not that important.

Listening to Drayton, you get the sense that you’ve stumbled upon a magical secret or, to quote a friend of his, Marjorie Benton, an “orchid in a crack in the pavement.” He has a remarkable intellect and an uncanny

ability to absorb information. At times, he seems oblivious to this ability, and he tends to assume that others are equally informed about such things as the rise and fall of the Mauryan dynasty, the social dynamics in Nagaland, or the circumstances that led to the drafting of the Magna Carta. But he is genuinely modest. And although, in a conversation, he is as likely to refer to, say, Philip II of Macedon as he is to George W. Bush, he does so without a hint of pretense. The effect is not to make you feel undereducated, but rather to get you excited to dig out your history books.

Drayton has worked as a lawyer, a management consultant, and a government administrator, but over the past quarter century, his main preoccupation has been traveling around the world looking for individuals who are working to bring about systemic social change. Along the way, he’s had thousands of detailed conversations with these people and has made it a matter of utmost importance to keep track (with little notebooks and a microcassette recorder) of the things they are doing that work and the things that don’t.

Ted Marmor, a friend of Drayton’s who teaches at the Yale School of Management, recalled a comment made by one of Drayton’s college professors years ago: “You’ve never seen anything like this fellow. It looks like a heavy wind would get rid of him—but he’s got the determination of Job and the brains of a Nobel laureate.” Marmor added his own assessment of Drayton: “This wispy, carefully controlled, blue-suited fellow has got enormous power. And connected to it is a shrewdness about the way institutions operate and the world really works.”

I first met Drayton in 1996, a few months after the publication of a book I had written on the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh.<sup>2</sup> Given my writing interest, a friend who had worked at Ashoka suggested that I interview him.

The Grameen Bank had pioneered and popularized a methodology for extending small, collateral-free loans for self-employment to some of the world’s poorest people.<sup>3</sup> Founded in 1976 by a Bangladeshi economics professor named Muhammad Yunus, by 2003 the bank had lent \$4 billion to 2.8 million Bangladeshi villagers, 95 percent of them women. With the additional income that Grameen’s working-capital loans bring millions of villagers are better able to feed their families, build tin-roof houses (that keep them dry during the monsoons), send their children to school, and accumulate assets for old-age security.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Yunus demonstrated that Grameen-style “micro-credit” enabled poor families to overcome poverty on a massive

scale. He played the leading role advancing a global movement—the “micro-credit revolution”—which has produced waves of change in international development. By 2002 more than 2,500 micro-credit programs were reaching 41.6 million of the world’s poorest families.<sup>4</sup>

In my book, I had focused on three questions: How did the Grameen Bank come to exist? How did it work? And how did the idea of micro-credit spread worldwide?

What I discovered was that Yunus had worked without pause for two decades to develop Grameen’s credit delivery system, and to institutionalize and market his idea. Countless people have contributed to the success of micro-credit—competent staff, enlightened donors, courageous borrowers—and many other organizations have pursued the idea independent of the Grameen Bank. But it is unlikely that micro-credit would have grown into a major global movement without Yunus’s vision, single-mindedness, persuasiveness, and energy.

I concluded my book by saying that if societies wanted to see more innovation of this sort, they would have to channel more support to entrepreneurs like Muhammad Yunus. At the time, I did not know that that was what Bill Drayton had been doing for fifteen years.

Before joining the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1977, Drayton had attended Harvard College, studied economics at Oxford University and completed a J.D. at Yale Law School, then worked for five years at the management consulting firm McKinsey & Company. He chose to specialize in economics, law, and management because he saw each discipline as a key tool to effect social change.

To get Ashoka going, he called up some colleagues whom he believed possessed the values and skills that would contribute to a strong institution.

“Bill called one day and said, ‘I want to incorporate this organization. Will you be on the board?’” recalled Julien Phillips, a colleague of Drayton’s from McKinsey’s public practice, who had been an early Peace Corps volunteer in Peru and had served as chief deputy director of the Department of Health under Governor Jerry Brown in California.

“I had a kind of leftist—but not socialist—idea of social change heavily influenced by the civil rights movement,” recalled Phillips. “When I was in the Peace Corps I barely knew what an entrepreneur was, and to the extent I did it was something *not very good*.”

“I hesitated. Bill said, ‘It won’t take much time for a while. I just need some names on an incorporation paper and we’ll talk later about what it might involve.’”

Drayton enlisted a few other colleagues with whom he had been discussing the idea for years: Ashok Advani, an Oxford classmate from Bombay (now called Mumbai) who had founded *Business India*, the country’s pioneer business journalism magazine; Anupam Puri, another Oxford classmate who had worked in McKinsey’s public practice on a broad range of health, education, and welfare issues; Stephen Hadley, a classmate from Yale Law School who had served in the navy and as a member of the National Security Council staff under President Ford; and Bill Carter, an EPA colleague who had completed a Ph.D. in Chinese studies and spent years working in Indonesia.<sup>5</sup>

Drayton thought hard about what to call his organization. “I thought it shouldn’t belong to any one tribe or group, which ruled out a name in any one language like English,” he recalled. “I also had a belief that the parochialism of Europe and America was a blinder that was hurtful. It never occurred to me to create a nonsense word like Exxon or Kodak. So the solution seemed to be to name it after a person.”

He had four heroes: Thomas Jefferson; Mohandas Gandhi; Jean Monnet, the architect of European unification; and the Indian emperor Ashoka, who unified much of South Asia in the third century B.C. and pioneered innovations in both economic development and social welfare. Drayton considered Ashoka to be one of history’s most tolerant, global-minded, and creative leaders.

He opted for Ashoka: Innovators for the Public. (In Sanskrit, *Ashoka* means the “active absence of sorrow.”) For the organization’s logo, Drayton chose an oak tree. Not only is an oak a tough tree, resistant to drought, that sets down long, deep roots, it is a “wonderful, spreading tree” affording much shade, that is often used as a meeting place in villages. It also reminded Drayton of the proverb: “From little acorns do great trees grow.”

During their Christmas vacations in 1978 and 1979, Drayton and his colleagues took exploratory trips to India, Indonesia, and Venezuela to figure out how to design a program to spot social entrepreneurs when they were still relatively unknown and predict the ones most likely to achieve major impact in the decades ahead. (To market test the idea, they focused on three countries of different sizes with dissimilar cultures.) Drayton wondered: “Was it possible to create a system that would, with high reliability, spot major pattern-changing ideas and first-class entrepreneurs before either were proven?”

Over a two-week period, Drayton and his team would meet with sixty or seventy people. “We’d go and see someone for breakfast, two people

during the morning, someone for a late lunch, someone for afternoon tea, and then dinner,” Drayton recalls. “We were systematic about it. We would go and see anyone who had a reputation for doing something innovative for the public good. And we kept asking questions: ‘Who in your field, as a private citizen, has caused a major change that you really respond to? How does it work? Is it new? Where do we find this person?’ Then we’d go and see that person and ask the same questions and get more names. We’d turn each name into a three-by-five card, and as the weeks went by, we’d begin to get multiple cards on people. At the end we had mapped out who was doing what in the different fields.”

One early concern was that an organization specializing in collecting information about local reformers would arouse suspicions of CIA or KGB involvement. But the signs were reassuring. “We found people very accessible,” he recalled. “We found lots of examples. We came away thinking, ‘Boy, these people are something,’ and seeing that it was really the right time to do this.”

Social entrepreneurs who would achieve the impact that Ashoka was seeking were rare, so it made sense to start looking in the biggest countries. In 1979, of the six most populous countries in the world, Brazil, China and the Soviet Union wouldn’t tolerate social entrepreneurship.



Bill Drayton interviewing Ashoka fellow Vivik Pandit, who has sharply reduced debt slavery in western India



Gloria de Souza

(Social entrepreneurs make dictators uncomfortable.) The United States was too expensive. Indonesia was a possibility, but the political situation would be tricky. That left India.

Drayton hired a representative in India and enlisted a committee of local volunteers to oversee the program. Initially, board member Ashok Advani arranged for office space in Delhi. Nominators and electors agreed to donate their time (as they still do). Funding came from friends, especially three with private foundations, and Drayton’s pocket. They started with about \$50,000.

By 1981 Drayton had collected hundreds of three-by-five cards, and Ashoka was ready to hold its first “selection panel.”

The first fellow elected was Gloria de Souza, a forty-five-year-old elementary school teacher in Bombay whose dream was to transform education across India. De Souza had been teaching for twenty years. Nothing pained her more than to walk through a school hallway and hear students repeating in unison: “Here we go ’round the mulberry bush.” To her, this rote learning—a holdover from the colonial era—was the very sound of minds being deadened.

In 1971 de Souza had attended a workshop on experiential and environmental education that opened her eyes to new educational opportunities. When she tried to get her colleagues to try out the methods, however, their response was cool. "It sounds great," she was told. "But it's not for India. The philosophy is good but it's totally impractical for us."

She decided to try it herself. She set aside her textbooks with their references to robins, bluebirds, and willow trees and took her students outside to learn about local birds and plants and explore questions such as: "Why do the monsoons come and go?" In lessons, she began substituting Indian names like Arun and Laila for Rover and Kitty. She took students on excursions to monuments such as the Gateway of India to learn about architecture and history, and she explored democracy through school elections. Teachers and administrators criticized her for using her students as guinea pigs, but the students' responded enthusiastically.

Over the next five years, de Souza tried and failed repeatedly to get the Jesuit school where she was teaching to adopt her methods. By the time Drayton met her, she had finally persuaded the teaching staff and administration to give them a try and was in the process of spreading her work to a second school. "I had finally been able to show teachers how it was possible to teach this way without making it too labor intensive for them," de Souza told me. "I also discovered that the best way to build up teachers' confidence is to tell them all the stupid things you did."

A private Jesuit school is far from the real India, however. The real challenge would be to carry experiential education to the Bombay public school system—and beyond. Drayton inquired if de Souza had considered her work in the context of Indian society as a *whole*.

She had.

"Do you know that 70 percent of the kids in Bombay want to emigrate?" she said to Drayton. "Something is *deeply wrong* in our society. And I think I can do something very important with this idea. If we can help children grow up learning to think rather than memorize and repeat, learning to problem solve, learning to be creative, learning to be actors rather than acted upon, we can create a generation that will be very different. And India will be very different. And that's a revolution."

From Drayton's point of view, there was nothing particularly novel about environmental education. The approach was well established in the United States, Canada, and Europe. "If you talked to Gloria and you just looked at environmental education you might say 'ho-hum,'" he said. His interest was not just de Souza's teaching ideas, but her ability to adapt them to India's specific circumstances—then market them.

How did she plan to get administrators, teachers, parents, and students in a rigid, authoritarian system to buy into her curriculum and teaching methods? How did she intend to make them attractive and nonthreatening? "It would be a challenge even if we had teacher-to-student ratios of one to twenty and reasonably equipped teachers," de Souza said. How to make the methods accessible to a poorly trained teacher in a public school in Bombay with sixty students in a classroom teetering on the edge of chaos?

These questions were what Drayton called the "how-tos"—the sorts of questions that theorists hate and entrepreneurs live for. De Souza was a gifted teacher, but success in this realm would demand salesmanship and resourcefulness and thick skin and a level of commitment bordering on obsession. These were the qualities Ashoka was looking for, and Drayton and his colleagues believed that they had found them in Gloria de Souza.

In order to disseminate her approach, de Souza said she would have to quit teaching and devote herself to the task full time. Ashoka granted her a four-year living stipend, a total investment, at the time, of about \$10,000.

The following year, in 1982, de Souza founded an organization called Parisar Asha, Sanskrit for "hope for the environment," and began building a team to spread her ideas. In a few years, she was able to demonstrate that her Environmental Studies (EVS) approach significantly increased students' performance. (One independent evaluation found that students learning with EVS scored twice as high on reading comprehension tests and mastered writing and mathematics three times faster than students taught by the rote method.) By 1985 de Souza had persuaded Bombay's municipal school board to introduce EVS in 1,700 schools through a pilot program. Within three years, almost a million students were learning with her methods. By the end of the 1980s, the Indian government had incorporated EVS into its national curriculum, making it India's official standard of instruction in grades one through three.<sup>6</sup>

Today, more than twenty years later, de Souza is still the driving force behind Parisar Asha. In the intervening decades, her work has influenced a generation of teachers and curriculum developers in India. Each year she improves her curriculum, extends her work to more cities, and looks for ways to adapt the methods to different environments, such as rural and tribal areas.