

## RESEARCH PAPER

# **SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP: A HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM PERSPECTIVE**

**Mehmet Ergul****Colin Johnson****Denise Kleinrichert****San Francisco State University**

**ABSTRACT:** The social entrepreneurship concept has been widely reported in the popular media and may be found within many programs in leading business schools. Social entrepreneurship is often included in discussions of non-profit studies, entrepreneurship, and corporate social responsibility. Concurrently, it would seem that many hospitality corporations are displaying greater awareness of their role in the community and pursuing some aspects of social entrepreneurship. There is evidence that a growing number of businesses make significant contributions to the community locally, regionally, nationally and even internationally. These companies appear to adopt socially responsible strategies, through philanthropy, environmental awareness and community support. This is an exploratory study that attempted to establish some further details of social entrepreneurship within the hospitality and tourism industries. Interviews were conducted with four prominent members within the sectors who were identified as social entrepreneurs. The results of this study are highly relevant to the hospitality and tourism industries, and may provide examples of best practice for other companies in related sectors. **Key words:** Social Entrepreneurship, Corporate Social Responsibility, Sustainability Entrepreneurship

**RESUMEN:** El concepto de emprendimiento social ha sido grandemente divulgado en los medios de comunicación y podemos encontrarlo en muchos programas de escuelas empresariales prestigias. El emprendimiento social es muchas veces incluido en discusiones de estudios sin fines lucrativos, de emprendimiento y de responsabilidad social empresarial. Simultáneamente, muchas empresas de hospitalidad parecen estar más consientes de su papel en la comunidad y buscan ir al encuentro de algunos aspectos del emprendimiento social. Se ha comprobado que un número creciente de empresas contribuyen significativamente para la comunidad local, regional, nacional e incluso internacional. Estas empresas parecen adoptar estrategias socialmente responsables, a través de la filantropía, de la consciencia ambiental y del apoyo a la comunidad. Este es un estudio exploratorio que buscó determinar más pormenores sobre emprendimiento social en las industrias de turismo y de la hospitalidad. Realizamos entrevistas con cuatro miembros proeminentes en este sector que fueron identificados como empresarios sociales. Los resultados de este estudio son extremadamente relevantes para las industrias del turismo y de la hospitalidad y podrán fornecer ejemplos de mejores prácticas para otras empresas en sectores idénticos. **Palabras-clave:** Emprendimiento Social, Responsabilidad Social Empresarial, Emprendimiento Sostenible.

**RESUMO:** O conceito de empreendedorismo social tem sido grandemente divulgado nos meios de comunicação e podemos encontrá-lo em muitos programas de escolas empresariais prestigias. O empreendedorismo social é muitas vezes incluído em discussões de estudos sem fins lucrativos, de empreendedorismo e de responsabilidade social empresarial. Simulta-

neamente, muitas empresas de hospitalidade parecem estar mais cientes do seu papel na comunidade e a procurar ir ao encontro de alguns aspetos do empreendedorismo social. Tem-se comprovado que um número crescente de empresas contribuem significativamente para a comunidade local, regional, nacional e até internacional. Estas empresas parecem adotar estratégias socialmente responsáveis, através da filantropia, da consciência ambiental e do apoio à comunidade. Este é um estudo exploratório que procurou determinar mais pormenores sobre empreendedorismo social nas indústrias de turismo e da hospitalidade. Realizámos entrevistas com quatro membros proeminentes neste sector que foram identificados como empresários sociais. Os resultados deste estudo são extremamente relevantes para as indústrias do turismo e da hospitalidade e poderão fornecer exemplos de melhores práticas para outras empresas em sectores idênticos. **Palavras-chave:** Empreendedorismo Social, Responsabilidade Social Empresarial, Empreendedorismo Sustentável.

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of social entrepreneurship has been widely reported in the popular media and is seen as an emerging discipline in sustainable business enterprise within many business schools. Social entrepreneurship is often included in discussions of non-profit studies, entrepreneurship, and corporate social responsibility (CSR). CSR is the embodiment of an organization's ethical and sustainability mission to consider its relationships with stakeholders who are both market (direct economic relationships) and nonmarket (indirect relationships) influences. Moreover, "the entrepreneurial context is not static; it evolves over time" and embodies ethical, social and environmental impacts on others (Morris et al., 2002, p. 331). Thus, social entrepreneurship is one aspect of a myriad of organizational relationships that focuses on the business responsibilities to deliver a product or service that communicates a concern for the well-being of those stakeholders impacted by the entrepreneur's market practices (Bohdanowicz & Zientara, 2008).

As may be expected, given the interest generated by the subject, social entrepreneurship has been tackled extensively as a subject generically in the business world. There are many annual conferences and symposia, with the resulting output of articles (Desa, 2007; Smith, Barr, Barbosa & Kickul, 2008; Oncer & Yildiz, 2010). The interest in sustainable business enterprise has not produced a body of literature on social entrepreneurship in the hospitality and tourism industry. There are, however, few recent studies that have dealt directly with the subject of social entrepreneurship and the hospitality and tourism industries, including Oncer and Yildiz (2010). In this respect, we look to further develop the notion of social entrepreneurial theory and its application to the hotel and tourism industry. For our purposes, we will use the following characteristics of social entrepreneurship to further define the parameters of our study: social entrepreneurship is the "conceiving, building, launching, and sustaining new [opportunities] and business models to create sustainable value for society" (Oncer & Yildiz, 2010, p. 223).

Concurrently, it would seem that many hospitality corporations are displaying greater awareness of their role in the community and pursuing some aspects of social entrepreneurship. Accor (a major European hotel chain) stresses its commitment to people and the environment; Starwood hotels has recently appointed a vice president for Corporate Social Responsibility; Kimpton hotels (a US national chain based in San Francisco) for several years has stressed environmental and community contributions; Wyndham developed in 2006 its core values and sees corporate social responsibilities, not as a program, but, “as a way of living, working and playing” that embodies their vision and values (Bohdanowicz & Zientara, 2008). Also at Scandic and Rezidor Groups, vice presidents responsible for sustainable business are members of the executive team (*ibid*). Moreover, Bohdanowicz and Zientara (2008) argue that tourism has the potential to effect socioeconomic and sociocultural impacts that bear ethical responsibilities to the community stakeholders involved in its development and enterprise. Moreover, tourism CSR is a key characteristic of both multinational and entrepreneurial endeavors, which is “embedded in the business model” (Bohdanowicz & Zientara 2008, p. 155). The stakeholders impacted are the same: employees, communities, environmental sustainability, consumers, suppliers and others. They each have a quality of life quotient that CSR initiatives influence (Bohdanowicz & Zientara 2008).

This is an exploratory study that attempted to establish some further details of social entrepreneurship within the hospitality and tourism industries. Interviews were conducted with four prominent members within the sectors who were identified as social entrepreneurs. Themes from the literature relating to social entrepreneurship were incorporated into a semi-structured interview, and the interviews were then analyzed.

The origins of social entrepreneurship may be traced to two different sources: that of income generation by a non-profit venture and, a more general interpretation that defines social entrepreneurship as a process that involved identifying, addressing and solving societal problems (Desa, 2007). Further, social entrepreneurship shares the same organizational determinations and entrepreneurship, openly constructed: “the supply-side school examines entrepreneurship by focusing on the individual characteristics of entrepreneurs, specifying potential mechanisms for agency and change, whereas the demand-side emphasizes the push and pull of context [such as social environmental needs]” (Thornton, 1999, p. 21). In other words, the Agency Theory is applicable to the social entrepreneur’s role of being both the principal and agent of change in meeting a social or environmental need for specific stakeholders. Dees (1996) makes the point that social entrepreneurs are a species of the *genus entrepreneur*. Furthermore, some argue that entrepreneurs are “often admired for the creative ways in which they

overcome significant limitations, obstacles and sources of resistance to their new venture ideas” (Morris et al., 2002, p. 334). Classically, there are several characteristics of entrepreneurship that may be attributed from leading writers and thinkers. Dees (1996) in a comprehensive review found that entrepreneurs are involved in: value creation, innovation, opportunities and resourcefulness.

Turning to the social side of the equation, the major differentiator is in the value proposition: to social entrepreneurs the pursuit of “mission-related impact” is primordial. For the “classic” or non-social entrepreneur, the value proposition is in anticipating and serving markets, thereby creating financial profit. For social entrepreneurs, the value is found in the form of large-scale transformational benefit that affects either sectors of society or society at large. In terms of personal characteristics, social entrepreneurs may be described as visionary change makers, implementing innovative ways of addressing pressing social problems. (Grenier, 2007). Shane & Venkataraman (2000) argue that, entrepreneurship entails a number of research questions which include:

“(1) why, when, and how opportunities for the creation of goods and services come into existence; (2) why, when, and how some people and not others discover and exploit these opportunities; and (3) why, when, and how different modes of action are used to exploit entrepreneurial opportunities” (p. 218). Therefore, the study of social entrepreneurship is necessary to tourism and hospitality endeavors.

As may be anticipated from this brief discussion, there are many different interpretations relating to what a social entrepreneur is (or is not).

Desa (2007) provides a dozen different definitions broken down into the themes of non-profit entrepreneur, non-profit innovation, social entrepreneur and subset of business entrepreneurship. We believed that two in particular were very applicable to this study: firstly, we appreciated the different roles that social entrepreneurs play in society identified by Dees (1998). According to Dees, social entrepreneurs play the role of change agents in society by:

“Adapting a mission to create and sustain social value not just private value;

Recognizing and relentlessly pursuing new operations to serve that mission;

Engaging in a process of continuous innovation, adaptation and learning;

Acting boldly without being limited by resources currently in hand;

Exhibiting a heightened sense of accountability to the constituencies served and for their outcomes created”

Secondly, we believed that Mair & Marti’s (2004) broad definition was very applicable to the study: “social entrepreneurship is defined

as the innovative use of resources to explore and exploit opportunities that meet a social need in a sustainable manner”.

This latter definition also ties in with the merging of the entrepreneurship and sustainable development literature, producing a new stream of research titles in sustainability entrepreneurship (Tilley and Parrish 2006) such as “ecopreneurs,” those who combine environmental awareness with the business objectives to ensure environmental friendly activities (Gibbs, 2006, p.65). Shane (2000) argues that “most research on entrepreneurship investigates the entrepreneurial process after opportunities have been discovered” (448). For example, research has shown that ecopreneurial motives necessarily intersect with economic and social constructs, rather than acting in a vacuum of strictly environmental corrections and solutions. For example, ecopreneurs are change agents who are motivated to be innovative in product and services, have a keen interest in ethical practices towards stakeholder networks, and identify with a profit-driven purpose to perpetuate their visions (Gibbs, 2006, p. 72). Stakeholder networks are the backbone of an entrepreneurial milieu focused on the value of meeting socioeconomic and eco-economic ends. In other words, “sustainability-driven entrepreneurs pursue economic as well as non-economic values” (Schlange, 2006, p. 14; Shane, 2000).

Sustainability entrepreneurship is seen to be a transformative model, not merely bolting on a social conscience to the standard business entrepreneurship model. In other words, this construct is transformative in that socioeconomic innovation is a core driver of the development of environmental impacts mitigation and value creation for communities that an entrepreneurial enterprise seeks to disentangle (O’Neill et al., 2006). On a micro level, the sustainability entrepreneur disaggregates the eco- and socio- efficiencies and effectivenesses as sources of opportunities for a variety of enterprise endeavors, including those with manufacturing supply chains, healthcare delivery systems and hospitality and tourism services. Moreover, sustainability entrepreneurial approaches utilize a “holistic value proposition” (HPV) to drive market opportunities that intersect with stakeholders and capital (O’Neill et al 2006, p. 36). In other words, sustainability-driven entrepreneurs see their enterprises in terms of a larger context, contributing to an overall improvement in social conditions, with a future-oriented perspective (Schlange, 2006).

Tilley and Young (2006) go further, believing that an important perspective of viewing sustainability entrepreneurs is that of a shift to a broader view of wealth creation, with a 12 point model that encompasses environmental entrepreneurship (environmental stability and sustainability) economic entrepreneurship (eco-effectiveness, eco-efficiency) social entrepreneurship (socio-efficiency, socio-effectiveness)

and sustainability entrepreneurship (including social responsibility and futurity). Also included are ecological, economic and inter-generational equity and sufficiency. The main point is that to be truly classed as sustainable, all of the elements of the model have to be pursued rather than focusing on the social or environmental aspects only. A final point is that Tilley and Young see sustainability entrepreneurs as *the* major source of wealth generation for the future.

In relation to studies examining the hospitality and tourism industries, as mentioned in the introduction, the subject of social entrepreneurship may often be included within that of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and environmental management. Furthermore, prior knowledge of CSR benefits to entrepreneurial endeavors, including tourism and hospitality practices, are helpful to social entrepreneurs in “their discovery of how to serve the market” if we use the arguments of Shane (2000, p. 462). There are several articles on corporate social responsibility. Holcomb, Upchurch and Okumus (2007) presented information that 8 out of the top 10 hotel companies reported socially responsible activities relating to some form of charitable donation. The authors also noted that hotel corporations reported in five major areas: community, environment, marketplace, vision and values, and workforce (*ibid*). Of the major hotel companies, Hilton Hotels Corporation, Marriott and Accor had the highest frequency of CSR reporting. (But only one company, Hilton, had any external verification of their data). Bohdanowicz and Zientara (2008a) examined the contribution of hotel companies’ impacts on employee well-being and also on local communities. One of the conclusions of the study was that CSR-driven projects can enable hotel companies to assist local communities as well as to cope with human resource management-related problems. Direct ways that hospitality companies can benefit local communities include donating unwanted linen, furniture and food to local charity organizations, serving food to various youth and parent organizations, coaching youths and offering entertainment facilities for the immediate communities. Wider aspects of CSR include focusing on free trade products and adopting environmental initiatives that may improve the quality of life of workers down the supply chain, and reduce the hotel’s impact on the environment. (Bohdanowicz & Zientara, 2008 a). The same authors also undertook an in-depth analysis of the Scandinavian Hotel Chain Scandic’s CSR practices (Bohdanowicz & Zientara, 2008 b).

### **Data Collection Procedures**

A qualitative research technique was used in collecting the data. Considering the nature of the research as “exploratory”, face to face, in-depth interviews were believed to be the most suitable method for

this study. The explorative interviews conducted could be considered as less structured in nature, but covered the “social entrepreneurship” topic in great detail (Britten, 1995). Similar to convenience sampling procedures, possible interviewee names from the hospitality and tourism industry were identified by using professional and personal networks. After a short correspondence period with the potential list, researchers carefully selected the interviewees considering their interest and knowledge about the topic. Interviewees in this case are thought to be key informants and content experts, hence direct personal communications with them were assumed to contribute to a better understanding of the social entrepreneurship concept.

Four interview sessions were conducted with: (a) an individual hotel developer, (b) a general manager of an international chain hotel, (c) the founder of a non-profit organization and (d) an individual restaurant developer / consultant. Each interview session lasted approximately one hour. The interviews took place in a quiet and casual setting and both researchers were present at each session.

Questions were sent to the interviewees in advance via e-mail. Questions addressed during the interviews were developed to scrutinize the importance of the social entrepreneurship topic in the hospitality industry in a broader scope including: (a) number and duration of the social entrepreneurship projects enrolled, (b) potential benefits derived from those projects, (c) motivational reasons to be involved in those projects, (d) problems encountered during those times, (e) future projects which involves social entrepreneurship and (f) other comments and opinions regarding the topic.

## **Data Analyses**

Researchers took notes and all the communications were audio recorded with the consent of the interviewees. The personal notes and recordings were considered important to obtain a valid and reliable evaluation of the interview sessions and also in reporting the findings. This could be seen in relation to Britten’s approach, where interviewers could ask further questions based on the interviewees’ answers mostly in clarifying and probing the details (Britten, 1995). For example, at the closing part of the interview sessions, where some spontaneous dialogues between the interviewers and interviewees took place regarding the topic and provided valuable information on newly generated ideas and individual expert opinions about the topic.

The content of the data from the audio recordings and the supplemental notes assisted in the preparation of the transcriptions. The content obtained through the transcriptions was then analyzed, compared and interpreted individually by the researchers in preparing the final analysis to report the findings of this study. This process is intended to reduce bias and believed to report the accurate findings for this study.

## RESULTS

In all of the interviews, researchers learned that interviewees have been involved with social entrepreneurship projects for more than two years. There could be several approaches used in reporting the findings of qualitative research. For this particular study, where explorative interviews took place, researchers believed that making and analyzing thematic connections would be very useful in searching for connecting threads and patterns (Seidman, 2006). Since this leads to a common practice of reporting the findings of qualitative research, identifying the categories, the common points addressed by the interviewees were then divided into themes (Horsburgh, 2002). As a result of this process, four main categories emerged at the end of the interview sessions including (a) environment conscious and socially driven projects; (b) motivational aspects; (c) return benefits of social entrepreneurship and; (d) real vs. perceived implementation costs.

### *Environment Conscious and Socially Driven Projects*

Social entrepreneurship was tied with sustainability and better environmental practices in three out of the four interview sessions. The establishment of a Green Hotel chain and establishing a certification process for Green Restaurants were the other two environmentally conscious topics disclosed by the interviewees. In terms of socially driven projects, organizational contribution to “Save the Bay” (an environment restoration program), donating to local charities such as Food banks and assisting people in need through back to work projects were additional areas mentioned by some of the interviewees.

### *Motivational Aspects*

In three out of the four interviews, community involvement is linked as one of the benefits of the social entrepreneurship projects. Intrinsic motivations of the social entrepreneurs were pointed out as an important factor in transforming society’s viewpoint towards this topic. Furthermore, the attempts to pass on the motivation to stakeholders were also discussed by some of the interviewees.

### *Return Benefits of Social Entrepreneurship*

Interviewees pointed out the identification of financial and non-financial returns derived from social entrepreneurship projects. In terms of financial returns, two out of four interviewees pointed out the “repeat” business to their organizations. In addition, three out of the four interviewees pointed out the financial benefits of Social Entrepreneurship to hospitality organizations. As for the non-financial returns, cre-



ating a socially responsible image emerged as an important factor in making a desirable company to work for. Improving the quality of internal and external communications was also discussed as a return.

### *Real vs. Perceived Implementation Costs*

Some of the real and perceived costs of implementing social entrepreneurship projects were that the projects were seen to be “expensive to do”. This could sometimes prove difficult to implement during economic fluctuations and so were highly reported by the interviewees. The cost of selecting and retaining the right stakeholders, increased time and material costs (such as bio-degradable materials) were also underlined. Difficulties in allocating budgets for social entrepreneurship projects were also mentioned.

## CONCLUSIONS

This was a preliminary study that was intended to give a glimpse of developments in social entrepreneurship within the hospitality and tourism industries and provide further insights for later, more comprehensive and detailed studies.

The results were encouraging, as the interviewees confirmed that several of the themes identified from the research were being practiced in the field. Two of the respondents may also be seen to be involved in applying the principles of sustainability entrepreneurship. Lounsbury & Glynn argue that cultural legitimacy in entrepreneurial endeavors create value for both the entrepreneurs and their constituents in that, “stories play a critical role in the processes that enable new businesses to emerge. Stories that are told by or about entrepreneurs define a new venture in ways that can lead to favorable interpretation” for legitimacy for themselves and their stakeholders (546, 549).

This is heartening, given the fact that the hospitality and tourism industries often labor under negative publicity relating to the image of the industries, including tough working conditions, low pay and high labor turnover. It would seem that the hospitality and tourism industries have many natural attributes for social entrepreneurship that may be extended: these attributes of the industry include high numbers of small and medium sized enterprise, core services of lodging, food and beverage that are highly valued by society, along with increasing peripheral services that may also be leveraged into social entrepreneurship projects.

Hospitality and tourism entrepreneurs may decide to take further steps of extending their projects, so that they may encompass all aspects of sustainability entrepreneurship. This, however, is more challenging, as it may be relatively easy to adopt certain aspects of sus-

tainable development and social projects piecemeal into the operation, but to embrace all aspects of sustainability entrepreneurship requires a fundamental reevaluation of the vision, mission and operation of all aspects of the business.

### **Recommendations and Future Implications**

Interviewees addressed broad areas and contributed well to the body of the research. Based on the comments from the interviews, the awareness of social entrepreneurship examples in the hospitality and tourism industries should be increased. The action list may include: (a) organizing conferences and workshops, (b) writing case studies, (c) creating e-newsletters, (d) adding social entrepreneurship to current hospitality and tourism management curriculums, (e) building partnerships between the industry and the academia and (f) international investigation of social entrepreneurship including partners in developing countries to conduct multi-faceted research.

The findings of this study could serve as a framework in developing a more detailed research instrument. Such an instrument may provide more detailed results in social entrepreneurship research. This may help for the concept to be more widely recognized internationally. It would be of interest to canvas and quantify the major international hospitality and tourism corporations and categorize their social entrepreneurship initiatives.

### **Limitations**

As this was an exploratory study, the study was limited in size and scope by the number of the interviewee responses, the representation from the different segments of the hospitality and tourism industries and the generalizability of the results.

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