



## Social Enterprise Summit Academic Forum: What is Next in Social Enterprise? A Conference Report

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### Overview

The Social Enterprise Summit (SES) was founded by the Hong Kong Policy Research Foundation in 2008, with the specific aim of promoting social entrepreneurship and social innovation as key drivers of positive social change in society. Management of the conference was transferred in 2014 to the Hong Kong Social Entrepreneurship Forum. Now in its 11<sup>th</sup> year, the 2018 Summit, held on 22<sup>nd</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> November 2018, saw an interactive Academic Forum held on Day 3, that sought to explore key issues facing social entrepreneurship research both currently and moving forwards. This forum, involving key scholars from the UK, US, Australia, China and Hong Kong, took the form of panel discussions, interactive Q&A sessions with the audience, alongside more traditional conference presentations. The panel discussions pitted the scholars into an adversarial (albeit collegiate) debate that explored whether social entrepreneurship was the solution to global social problems (or not), with the audience being asked to vote with their feet by moving from one side of the room to the other depending upon which side of the argument they agree with. The aim of the Academic Forum was to therefore explore the key issues facing social entrepreneurship from a research perspective, but also to then apply these to a practice and policy setting.

This report forms part of a wider research project titled the 'Building Research Innovation for Community Knowledge and Sustainability' (BRICKS) project in Hong Kong. The project provides an innovative and impactful approach to supporting the higher education sector in Hong Kong, by supporting students, teachers and early-career researchers to develop the skills that they need to be socially innovative leaders, and to co-create social innovation cultures within the sector.

The report has been developed through analysis of the SES Academic Forum [video](#) that captured the event, as well as analysis of the written materials submitted to the conference

(PowerPoint presentations) from the presenters. In addition, a literature review of social entrepreneurship research has been conducted involving academic journal papers, conference papers, books and grey literature (i.e. policy documents) where relevant. This analysis has been triangulated to identify five key themes, namely: Definitions and Hybridity; Globalisation and Ecosystems; Institutions and Policy; Partnerships and Collaborations; and Social Impact Measurement. These will be discussed in turn through this report in relation to understanding where social entrepreneurship research needs to progress in each area moving forwards. The report also includes a section where prominent journals in the field are detailed, including their impact factors and H-Indexes, so as to provide some guidance to researchers looking to engage with the academic literature. The findings from the paper clearly demonstrate the richness of the research field surrounding social entrepreneurship, but also point to the need for greater clarity around concepts, deeper collaboration in research (both multi-stakeholder and interdisciplinary), and policy/institutional frameworks to support social entrepreneurship.

## Globalisation & Ecosystems

Social entrepreneurship as a concept is contested and the definitional debates around it are often myopic. However, geographical factors also influence how social entrepreneurship is viewed and the types of social enterprises that emerge. Teasdale (2012:100) identified that social enterprise is 'politically, culturally, historically and geographically variable' and there have been numerous studies that have explored social enterprise around the world (see: Kerlin, 2013; Defourny and Nyssens, 2010; Galera and Borzaga, 2009; Doherty et al., 2009). Research has shown that the type of social enterprise that emerges in each region is based within the institutional context that it emerges (Mendell, 2010) and whilst there isn't the space here to review social enterprise typologies globally, Kerlin's (2010; 2013; 2017) work provides a good starting point. This context has been termed ecosystems (as a biological metaphor) and the origins of the types of social enterprises within these ecosystems has been related to historical (genetic) and environmental (epigenetic) factors that shape the emergence of different phenotypes (sub-species of social enterprise) (Hazenberg et al., 2016a).

Research has also noted that such ecosystems are social systems, where networks and relational capital enable (or inhibit) the flow of resources, hence constraining the types of social enterprise that emerge (Hazenberg et al., 2016b). This allows those with power to shape normative behaviour and to drive the types of social enterprises that emerge, resulting in heterogeneous ecosystems where there is low power-distance and homogenous ecosystems where there is high power distance (Puumalainen et al., 2015; Hazenberg et al., 2016b). From such perspectives social enterprise can be seen as the result of dominant discourse driving behaviour (Dey and Steyaert, 2014) with social enterprises having to conform to normative expectations through a process of 'tactical mimicry' to survive (Dey and Teasdale, (2016). This can lead to what Professor Michael Roy during his SES presentation

called the dominance of western academia and the importing of language to explain local phenomenon. Whilst it would be an exaggeration to suggest that in this way social enterprise is a form of neo-imperialism, the danger nevertheless persists that social enterprise in this global context does not always emerge as a locally driven, bottom-up social innovation. As Professor Teasdale (rather mischievously) quipped during the Forum, social enterprise with this lens could be seen as an industry in itself, self-replicating and solving social problems that do not exist.

However, the above surely paints a too gloomy picture for the evolution of social enterprise. Professor Roy also argued during his presentation that social enterprise can act as a positive force for globalisation and as a mechanism for solving some of the ‘upstream’ factors that lead to social problems. Indeed, he called for deeper partnerships and collaborations between universities in the Global North and Global South, and for a greater willingness for developed countries to learn from the social innovations that are emerging in developing countries (a counter-revolutionary approach for social enterprise perhaps?). This would certainly help to drive pluralism and hence decrease power-distance (Puumalainen et al., 2015), and lead to a more heterogeneous social enterprise sector globally (albeit this could cause further headaches regarding definitions). Indeed, this is increasingly being seen through the interventions of supra-national bodies and organisations seeking to support research into and the development of social enterprises around the world<sup>1</sup>. A good example here relates to social value and sustainability in supply chains, with the work of the OECD prominent in exploring due diligence for [Responsible Business Conduct](#) (OECD, 2018). This is an area that is also suggested as an avenue for future research by Professor Bob Doherty, who argues in his overview for the SES conference that further research on ‘social enterprise value chains could provide new insights for value chain research, which tends to take a narrow economic focus’ (Doherty, 2018). Certainly, this is an area in which social entrepreneurship with its focus on hybridity could drive wider impact in the corporate world and beyond.

There are clearly multiple challenges for social entrepreneurship as a global concept and for its emergence locally in a globalised world. However, these challenges also provide opportunities to drive positive social impact on a large scale, utilising social enterprise as the vehicle for such change. As Professor Cooney argued in her presentation, there is a need to develop truly interdisciplinary, multi-stakeholder, ‘epistemic communities’ to meet these challenges. Such communities can engage in broader systems change and systems thinking, particularly in relation to solving the ‘wicked’ social problems that exist in society. Indeed, researchers are now exploring how systems thinking can be applied in creating sustainable social enterprises, especially in chaotic environments (Dzombak, 2014). This is not to say that social entrepreneurship provides solutions to all of these problems (as was discussed during the Forum). Indeed, a recent critique of this view-point made by Ganz, Kay and Spicer (2018)

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<sup>1</sup> For examples see the work of the United Nations Development Programme (2018) in Vietnam in their report [‘Fostering the Growth of the Social Impact Business Sector in Vietnam’](#). In addition, the work of the British Council (2019) globally to support social enterprise growth through its [‘State of Social Enterprise Reports’](#) across various countries, and the OECD (2017) in [‘Boosting Social Enterprise Development’](#).

argues that social enterprise detracts from the function of government and an engaged citizenry by legitimising neoliberal (anti-state) agendas. They argue that only an engaged citizenry and effective public policy can solve society's problems. Whilst this is contentious, it is certainly the case that what Cooney (2018) termed 'epistemic communities' will need to include citizen-led bottom-up social innovation and public policy initiatives to support this (and research as to how best to foster these). The role of institutions and public policy in driving social enterprise growth and social change is an area that will now be explored.

### Institutions and Policy

Arguments about the role of social enterprises in solving social problems and their position as a supplement or replacement for the welfare state are not new. Since New Labour introduced 'third way' policy in the UK, which sought to tread a path between private sector provision in the New Public Management mould (Haugh and Kitson, 2007; Osborne and Gaebler, 1992) and traditional state provision of public services, by utilising third sector organisations (especially social enterprise) as public service deliverers, this tension has existed. McKay et al. (2015) have documented the process of marketisation in the UK third sector that this led to, and that is still arguably occurring through the drive around social investment. It is also seen elsewhere, notably in the Australian context where social enterprise is viewed as a response to an increasingly residualised welfare state (Barraket et al., 2017). This is certainly an area that was explored during the SES Forum by Associate Professor Ruth Phillips, who identified social enterprise's role in the rise or demise of neoliberal dominance in economic discourse as a key area for future research (Phillips, 2018). To a degree, this becomes a question of institutional frameworks and how various sectors work collaboratively (or not) in solving social problems (also see the next section on partnerships and collaborations). Certainly, policy-makers are strongly placed to develop institutional and policy frameworks to support social entrepreneurship, as has been seen around the world with the creation of specific legal forms for social enterprise e.g. Community Interest Companies in the UK; or the L3C Corporations in the United States. However, they can also constrain social enterprise growth in equal measure, as has been seen in Australia with the legal constraints placed on crowd-sourced equity fund-raising (Barraket et al., 2017). As Associate Professor Meng Zhao stated during the panel discussion, institutions are critical in defending and upholding social welfare and social justice, and the interplay between these and civil society is what drives or constrains social innovation.

Nicholls (2010) articulated almost a decade ago that social entrepreneurship was a pre-paradigmatic field that was at a nascent level of development, understanding and theory building and that this was leading to a development curve that allowed more powerful actors to shape narratives and distort discourse (a theme returned to by Dey and Steyaert in 2014). One could seriously ask the question as to how far we have come since this time. Admittedly, the development of academic theory, of policy and institutional frameworks and support has driven social entrepreneurship forwards over the last decade, but the questions raised by the

Forum panellists (and audience) were developments of what was being asked ten years ago. Whilst to a degree, this represents the natural progression of academic debate and theory building, it does still show how far the field has to go to reach maturity. Nevertheless, the debates did raise the importance of effective policy and institutions (including welfare states) in solving social problems and supporting social entrepreneurship. Effective support through policy and funding has been shown to allow the interplay of competing logics in driving social innovation (Vickers et al., 2017). As Professor Cooney (2018) argued in her presentation, we therefore need new lenses with which to analyse these historical topics, with social movement theory being a particularly good example of how different theoretical lenses can be applied to well-trodden paths (institutional and management theories for instance).

Social entrepreneurship can be argued as being not just an economic and social development, but one that can also occur in policy and broader institutions as well. This can take the form of social intrapreneurship, which is outside the scope of this paper (for a broader introductory discussion of social intrapreneurship see: Kistruck and Beamish, 2010; Nandan, London and Bent-Goodley, 2014; and Hadad and Cantaragiu, 2017). However, it can also take the form of policy entrepreneurship, in which social entrepreneurs emerge from public sector institutions to lead socially entrepreneurial transformations of services (Hazenberg and Hall, 2016). In such scenarios, social entrepreneurship emerges as socially innovative solutions to public service delivery or the reform of welfare services, critically enabled by policy windows created by policy-makers (Kingdon, 1995). Indeed, Vickers et al. (2017) have shown how the logics of the state, market and civil society shape social innovation in the public sector, again demonstrating the crucial interplay between the different sectors of the economy. The role of partnerships and collaboration is an area that is critical in driving innovation in public services, and within institutional frameworks (Hazenberg and Hall, 2016). Indeed, this need for partnerships and collaboration to develop pluralistic systems that enable community action and empower the disadvantaged, was an emergent theme from the SES Forum. This was demonstrated during some of the presentations, such as the discussion of business/community partnerships and how policy support, technology and investment can enable these (Phillips, 2018); and the role of partnerships/collaborations in diffusing new models of innovation (Cooney, 2018). As Associate Professor Norah Wang argued, the public sector fundamentally needs to be entrepreneurial and needs innovations to overcome austerity and demographic changes.

## Partnerships and Collaborations

As has been noted throughout this paper, the prior literature surrounding social entrepreneurship and the debates and presentations at the SES Forum regularly argued for the increasing use of multi-stakeholder partnerships and collaborations to solve social problems and support social enterprise growth. Cross-sector partnerships are particularly viewed as beneficial, and indeed relate back to the hybrid nature of social enterprises that makes them so distinct. The partnerships literature in relation to social enterprise is

increasingly gaining traction globally, with explorations of the mechanisms of partnership working for social enterprises taking place in: Korea (Choi, 2014); Canada (Rathi, Given, and Forcier, 2014); the US and Bangladesh (Houghton and Wilson, 2012); and Mexico (Orozco-Quintero, and Berkes, 2010), to provide a few examples.

When discussing these issues during the Forum, the speakers argued for partnership working between six main stakeholder groups, namely:

1. *government* (policy-makers, funders, public services);
2. *private sector* (corporations, investors, SMEs);
3. *third sector* (charities, social enterprises, voluntary associations);
4. *international bodies/organisations* (supra-national bodies such as OECD, NGOs);
5. *academia* (universities, technical associations/institutes);
6. *community* (citizens, beneficiaries).

Indeed, as Professor Alex Nicholls said towards the end of the forum, understanding the interplay between these stakeholder groups around specific social issues, especially across historical timescales, is important in understanding how social innovations ebb and flow and where failure occurs.

The need for cross-cultural partnerships and studies is also critical if global conceptions of social enterprise are to be developed, and if best practice is to be shared and the impacts felt globally. Professor Michael Roy stated that interdisciplinary work that involved partnerships between the global south and the global north were critical in driving forwards social entrepreneurship research and enabling social innovation. Examples of this were cited earlier on in this report, including the work of the British Council, UNDP, and the OECD. Another example here are academic networks and funded collaborations, including the International Comparative Social Enterprise Models ([ICSEM](https://www.iap-socent.be/icsem-working-papers)) led by Professor Jacques Defourney and Professor Martha Nyssens, which seeks to map institutional frameworks and models of social enterprise globally (for a full list of country reports visit <https://www.iap-socent.be/icsem-working-papers>). The European Commission has also funded several Pan-European research projects, including the ‘Social Entrepreneurship as a Force for more Inclusive and Innovative Societies’ ([SEFORIS](#)) project; and the ‘Enabling the Flourishing and Evolution of Social Entrepreneurship for Innovative and Inclusive Societies’ ([EFESEIIS](#)) project. Indeed, the SES Conference and the Academic Forum itself are examples of academic partnerships where groups of stakeholders (including practitioners and policy-makers) can come together to discuss the challenges faced by social innovation and social enterprise ecosystems.

What is critical when these partnerships are established though is that they are genuine two-way exchanges of knowledge between equal partners. The partnership literature is replete with examples of how seemingly equal partnerships are in fact skewed by power imbalances, hidden hierarchical structures and funding arrangements (Whitehead, 2007; Fenwick et al., 2012). This is also a particular problem when third sector and public sector organisations engage in partnerships or collaborative governance (Cornforth, Hayes, and Vangen, 2015). It

is also an issue, as identified by Professor Michael Roy during the Forum, in partnerships between universities in developed and developing countries. During his talk, Professor Roy referenced the need to use local terminology and relevant language to describe local phenomenon. He provided the example of academic panels focused on indigenous issues, utilising the International Social Innovation Research Conference as an example (ISIRC 2017 had a panel titled 'Unlocking the innovation potential of Maori knowledge, resources and people'). Genuine (and long-term) partnerships between academia, communities and development organisations are critical if social entrepreneurship and innovation are to be used to drive international development and economic growth in the global south (Houghton and Wilson, 2012). The need for community-led innovation through communities of practice, and the co-creation of learning is critical to this process, with de-centred (and hence depowered) stakeholder networks providing the pluralistic environment to achieve such development (Calton et al., 2013).

### Social Impact Measurement

The final area to emerge from the Forum debates was the issue of social impact measurement. Whilst ordinarily this could be placed within the Institutions and Policy section as a sub-theme to be explored in relation to regulatory frameworks, because of its prominence in academia, but especially policy and practice, it has been placed here as its own standalone section. One of the key difficulties with social impact measurement (SIM) is that there is no accepted definition of what social impact constitutes (Sairinen and Kumpulainen, 2006), and this is compounded by the multitude of different impact methodologies that exist around the world (Millar and Hall, 2013; Hehenberger et al., 2013). Social impact is also a socially constructed term, meaning different things to different groups (Burdge and Vanclay, 1996), and so there is a need to ensure that any research conducted in this area is culturally relevant. Nevertheless, it is critical for social entrepreneurs to be able to demonstrate their impact and the positive value that they create, in order to generate legitimacy and access resources (i.e. social investment) (Nicholls, 2009; Barraket and Yousefpour, 2013).

The European Commission sought to overcome these definitional and process issues by developing its own framework for best practice in social impact measurement. The GECES sub-committee report on social impact measurement sought to define social impact, map out the processes for measuring it, and provide guidance on the types of research to be undertaken. Clifford, Hehenberger and Fantini (2014:12) in the GECES report defined social impact as *'The reflection of social outcomes as measurements, both long-term and short-term, adjusted for the effects achieved by others (alternative attribution), for effects that would have happened anyway (deadweight), for negative consequences (displacement), and for effects declining over time (drop-off)'*. The GECES report also identified five key factors to account for when engaging in social impact measurement:

- *Inputs*: What resources are used in the delivery of an intervention?
- *Activity*: What is being done with the 'inputs' (i.e. the intervention)?

- *Output*: How that activity touches the intended beneficiaries?
- *Outcome*: the change arising in the lives of beneficiaries and others.
- *Impact*: The extents to which that change arise from the intervention.

(Clifford et al., 2014:6)

The measurement of outcomes is still an under-developed area, as was noted by Professor Roy during his presentation, when arguing for the need to understand better how social entrepreneurship drives positive outcomes for beneficiaries, namely improved well-being. However, other cognitive benefits could also be used in place of this as well, including self-efficacy and resilience (to name but a few). The key is to ensure that outcomes are adequately captured and relevant to the social enterprises' mission.

The GECES framework also provides an overview of five stages that should be engaged in when conducting social impact measurement, again echoing the themes discussed earlier in this paper in relation to partnerships with stakeholders, and the dissemination of learning:

1. *Identify objectives*: What are the objectives of the impact measurement (i.e. organisation and partners)?
2. *Identify stakeholders*: Who are the beneficiaries and who provide resources?
3. *Relevant measurement*: Understand the theory of change and then utilise relevant indicators to capture this.
4. *Measure, validate and value*: Assess whether outcomes are achieved and whether they are recognised by the various stakeholders.
5. *Report, learn and improve*: Ensure the dissemination of and meaningful use of the data gathered and findings produced to internal and external stakeholders/audiences.

(Clifford et al., 2014:7)

The creation of regulated impact measurement frameworks that correspond to international best practice (perhaps by organisations such as the UN or OECD) can legitimise social entrepreneurship by providing evidence of impact to funders and policy-makers. Nevertheless, whilst SIM offers many opportunities, it also presents significant barriers, most notably in relation to the often lack of cultural/local relevance of tools, the lack of expertise within social enterprises and the lack of resource for carrying out work that could detract from the social mission. It also can provide a means for elites or those within the ecosystem with power to shape discourse and social action, through the creation of measurement frameworks that drive behaviour and incentivise certain types of outcomes (Voltan and Hervieux, 2017). In addition, we should not see 'Big Data' or data driven approaches as the 'be-all and end-all' in social enterprise research. As Professor Nicholls stated during the panel discussion '*...we have to get away from fetishizing that if we can just get more, and more, and more data, we will suddenly have an epiphany and understand the world better than we did before. Actually, it could be the opposite, we could get more confused*'. Indeed, SIM can be an extremely useful tool, but only when we plan carefully what we are measuring and why. Further developments in this area from researchers would though help to clarify this area.

## Summary & Future of Research

The SES Academic Forum provided interesting debates about the current state of research into social entrepreneurship, social enterprise and social innovation, and future directions for research. The key themes to emerge from the conference, and that have been explored in this paper in relation to the prior literature, demonstrate that greater understanding is required around definition, institutional frameworks, policy, and the role of partnerships and impact measurement in growing social entrepreneurship as a global phenomenon. The need for interdisciplinary research that encompassed multiple theoretical standpoints (i.e. institutional theory and social movements theory) can provide the analytical lenses that are required to take our understanding of these complex phenomenon to the next level. The dissemination of this research through multiple formats (not just academic conferences) is also crucial in ensuring that the messages around the positive value that social entrepreneurship can deliver reach those with the power to drive social change. Finally, the need for multi-stakeholder partnerships between academics, practitioners, communities, governments and NGOs, is also of paramount importance in ensuring that new innovations are culturally relevant, coproduced and have the greatest impact possible. As Professor Kevin AU from the Chinese University of Hong Kong said *'...the indigenous point of view is very important, and I do believe as a person from Hong Kong that the development of social enterprise movement is quite different from other places, so in that sense for local scholars who are interested in this area, I think maybe some of the local material could also be published in some of the journals, because we have a unique development'*.

## Appendix

Speakers at SES Academic Forum 2018:

1. Dr Kate COONEY  
Lecturer in Social Enterprise and Management, School of Management, Yale University, US
2. Prof Alex NICHOLLS, MBA  
Professor of Social Entrepreneurship, Saïd Business School, University of Oxford, UK  
Editor, Journal of Social Entrepreneurship
3. Prof Ruth PHILLIPS  
Associate Dean, Research Education in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, The University of Sydney, Australia

4. Dr Michael ROY  
Senior Lecturer of Social Business, Yunus Centre for Social Business and Health, Glasgow Caledonian University, UK
5. Prof Simon TEASDALE  
Professor of Public Policy and Organisations, Yunus Centre for Social Business and Health, Glasgow Caledonian University, UK
6. Dr Norah WANG  
Research Assistant Professor, Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, HK
7. Prof ZHAO Meng  
Associate Professor, Renmin Business School, China

#### Facilitators at SES Academic Forum 2018

1. Mr Tristan ACE  
Social Enterprise, Global Partnerships and Development Lead, Asia Pacific, British Council
2. Prof Kevin AU  
Associate Professor, Department of Management, Chinese University of Hong Kong
3. Dr Yanto CHANDRA  
Associate Professor, Department of Public Policy, City University of Hong Kong

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