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Title

How Do Social Enterprises (SE) Foster Sustainable Development? An Analysis of SE Development Narratives

Abstract

Despite the increasing importance of SEs as a new, alternative development model (Cieslik, 2016; Galvin & Iannotti, 2015; Venot, 2016), we know very little about SE development work, and more specifically, about the narratives that SEs employ to represent and promote their work, better known as development narratives (Büscher, 2014; Roe, 1991). SE is different from conventional development models such as politically motivated foreign aid programs and development loans, and top-down rural development programs. Therefore, its narratives may differ from conventional development narratives. Importantly, SE development narratives provide insights into how social entrepreneurs construct social reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). If these narratives are examined longitudinally, they can shed light on what social entrepreneurs pay attention to (Ocasio, 1997) across time and economies relative to conventional development narratives. Consequently, this paper asks an important research question: How have social entrepreneurs’ development narratives changed across time and economies?

To answer the question, this study employed narratology — the study of narratives using textual data — (Lounsberry & Glynn, 2001; Sewell, 2010) and computational linguistics (CL) (Baker, 2012; Rayson, 2008) to study Ashoka-supported social entrepreneurs (hereafter Fellows) and their SEs. Ashoka engages in development work in various fields (e.g., poverty, education, healthcare) by supporting thousands of social entrepreneurs (Ashoka Fellows) in more than 70 countries. This study focused on 1,076 narrative profiles of Ashoka Fellows from two periods (2009-2013 and 1994-1998) and two economies (developing and developed). To analyze the narrative data, the study employed ‘keyness’ (the ‘aboutness’ of a target corpus that differentiate it from a baseline corpus), semantic category (tagging each word in a corpus based on predetermined semantic categories), collocation (word bundling patterns), n-grams (complex word bundling patterns), and keyword-in-context (the qualitative meaning of a target word in the context of other words) analyses.

The findings showed that two general themes cut across time and economies: i) the “compelling
story” format, and ii) a neutral- to soft-sell style. Additionally the analysis identified five themes that differed across time and economies: i) ‘citizen organization’ identity, which reflects the SE’s community/collaborative focus (observed only across time), ii) a hybrid frame that combines business and impact evaluation but not a non-profit frame, as a central feature of SEs, iii) technology or solution-centric thinking, iv) stakeholder orientation, which reflects external entities that SEs work with (e.g., local government officials, corporations, local community members), and vii) the rise of topical areas such as healthcare, agriculture and the environment (for the later period only) as well as rights, government and social inclusion (for developing economies only). These findings suggest that Ashoka SE development narratives:

• are less political and more pragmatic, community focused, and steeped in technical language than conventional development narratives;
• incorporate current development ideas, theories and models but are reframed to address contemporary, complex development challenges; and
• show that SEs employ a bottom-up approach by encouraging local ownership of problems and solutions and collaborations with other government, NGOs and profit-making organizations to achieve their goals.

Keyword

development, narrative, social entrepreneur, social enterprise