

Social innovation | Where's the innovation?

At the heart of what he was talking about was what he initially called a barefoot technology. In part, he was saying: you're drawing on local knowledge. His argument is that in villages, even with illiterate people, there is a lot of expertise. There is a lot of knowledge there that you don't have to go to college to get and he talks about some examples: the dentist; waterproofing the roof. This is all knowledge that's there. He talks about the rainwater collection. He talks about the gardening. This is all, in a sense, indigenous technology.

Why do you need to send people away to school? There is really good professional knowledge and you could bring in to try to create this; but he also brought in what you might think of as some new or non-indigenous knowledge, which was about solar technology and the architect that designed what they built.

This technology demanded that, in fact, people who are part of local community needed to be trained. They didn't know intuitively how to use that technology. Now, he mentioned, the priest who he said knew everything about the technology. But, he had already obviously trained him. It was partly the case of the priest that, obviously, made

him think that you can train people who are illiterate and basically show their intelligence and add to their indigenous knowledge.

He talks about three types of training. First, the night schools for children. There, he talks about the student government. He talks about the puppet training. Lastly, he talks about the grandmothers; and this was an international program to train grandmothers in using the solar technology, solar cookery, and in terms of creating light and how you used it.

In terms of the number of things he mentioned, these were the elements. What of these elements was really new? You can say that you had these schools with the certain kinds of programs. He used the process, which is drawing on this local knowledge and bringing it together into what he calls barefoot technology.

He certainly uses some products—solar technology, architects to create other products—there were these different elements of solar technology which he used. The trainings, obviously, became also a kind of a platform and the Barefoot College was a platform for all of this. But where's the innovation? What made this new or unusual?

Well, partly, in bringing them in together. Now, the notion of barefoot professionals was not new. He mentioned Gandhi. This was part of Gandhi's thinking. Long before he came on the scene, there was this idea about barefoot doctors and barefoot paramedics that you could try to get people to take care of health care.

That wasn't entirely new, but it was probably new to bring all this local knowledge to a particular place and create this thing called Barefoot College. Solar technologies: well, that's relatively new compared to the whole notion of Barefoot College but it wasn't new, he didn't invent it.

What was unusual about it was bringing it in to this very rural local knowledge-based situation and in order to do that, he had to create some training. Now, what about the night schools? Was that something new or the student government?

It's not very new, is it, that notion of training children in democracy? Maybe having it at night was new, but we all have night schools. That's not really new. In the puppet training, he talks about it being hundreds of years old, and that puppets have always been used as a form of communication. He mentions the novelty of making them out of World Bank

reports. Maybe that was a fact and maybe it was just a joke; probably just a joke.

The notion of grandmothers is probably a notable element: that that's a particular group that you would want to train to do these things and the possible impact on women and women's relationships, etc. What's really notable about it is it has multiple elements and they grew overtime.

One thing led to another lead to another, it was emergent but it was really the juxtaposition of these elements that strikes you. It was the *relationship* between them that strike you as something very new. Then, when you say, "Okay. It has some transformative potential," he mentions Sierra Leone and Gambia and the fact that that's had a higher level of political impact. But you begin to say, "Well, what system is it having an impact on?" That gets a little tougher.

You mentioned poverty, rural poverty. That's one. Then, maybe the initial thing of trying to use local knowledge to create a better life for people in local areas. You didn't have to send them away to go to school. They didn't have to leave. And you talked about women. All these issue around grandmothers are, in a sense, women's rights or empowerment; but

that was probably emergent and probably wasn't there initially.

It was also the whole notion that you had to go away, you had to leave. It's really not just rural poverty but cultural assimilation as a problem. Everybody is losing their own culture thinking that these westernized things are best. That's Gandhi's notion of going back. It's a Gandhian notion.

You have at least three. There are probably more complex problem domains that this perhaps addresses or doesn't address, but when you ask yourself, "Does it have the impact to transform the system?" That becomes another question altogether. Does it actually have impact to change those broader systems? What do you think? Do you think it has potentially changed women's rights, women's empowerment, or women's status? Because there are some little worrying signs: that there's likely to be a backlash where men aren't going to like this' has it really changed their status? Is it going to change rural poverty?

He says at the beginning that the men always want to go away and to get a credential, so they can get jobs. In a cash economy, in the global market place in which we live, in a sense what they're doing is saying, "Let's be

self-sufficient in this one little area. We can provide everything we need for ourselves and we should recognize that we can provide everything we need for ourselves."

Well, in fact they weren't. He never made it quite clear where the funds were coming from for this, but this wasn't cheap to bring these technologies in, and to fly people in from Gambia. He's raising money for that. He is part of the elite in India. In a sense, he's using his resources to make this little world. Without him, would they be able to continue to do it? It's questionable.

You don't really know whether it's going to transform that system. It certainly makes a little piece of it more tolerable for the people in it, like almost a pilot project; but can it change it? Now, I am not saying it can't. Cultural assimilation...maybe. Maybe there is where it offers the most potential if, in fact, people feel that without changing their ways but building on what they know in their own local sources of resilience, they can improve their lot, then they're more likely to say, "We're going to do it our way," which prevents the problem with cultural assimilation. But, over time, will this continue to work or will people continue to be drawn into this much more global arrangements?

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The answers aren't there and I'm not saying we should come to those answers. They're just the questions that you need to ask of someone who is a social innovator. But it does show you how any innovation that's interesting has many complex elements in it and to understand the potential impact it might have, you need to understand what they are and what kind of system concerns they address—i.e. what makes them innovative.

At this point, you've answered these questions about Barefoot College, but you really need to start thinking about what are social innovations in your own problem domain and around the particular problem that calls to you within that system.

You begin to say, "*What do you think?*" just as a hunch. You're looking for interesting, promising, or exciting innovations. Could you ask the same questions of those innovations? Could you do an exercise now where you took an innovation and you tried to deconstruct it in the same way that we did the Barefoot College? This would be in order to see what are the elements, what's new, what isn't new, what makes it innovative, and in what particular complex problem domains does it offer a possibility of

transformation or not. Even if you decided it doesn't, it doesn't rule it out, but it gives you an understanding of what its potential is to actually transform.