



Social Entrepreneurship in Singapore

by Fiona R. on March 14, 2012

We take a closer look at the social entrepreneurship landscape in Singapore.



Contrary to popular belief, **Social Enterprise** is not charity. It is not in the business of asking for money so that it can sustain itself. Instead, it is a somewhat hardier and more business-savvy creature that is engaged in trading, such that it brings about social change or supports a social purpose.

But money is not its purpose – while it does seek financial sustainability, the aim of Social Entrepreneurship, however, is to create social value that is central to the mission of the business, so they pursue more than one bottom-lines (commonly double and triple).

By this definition, there could be about 150 social enterprises in Singapore today, with some of the more prominent ones being successful enterprises like popular dining place, **18 Chefs** and **Buy1Give1Free**. Social enterprises have sprung up to meet an unmet need; entrepreneurs see a gap in the community – usually a particular group or cause, and work to fill it.

Some good examples would be **18 Chefs** and **Professor Brawn Cafe**. **18 Chefs** is a classic small restaurant chain that gives ex-convicts not only a job, but also a chance to also work on their recovery. At **Professor Brawn Cafe**,

autistic people – who make up at least 30% of their workforce, are trained and hired at market rate.

While Benny Teo, founder of 18 Chefs, has a bone to pick about Singaporeans' general sentiment towards Social Enterprise – a form of charity looking for donations and financial aid, he has much to herald about, for the government actively seeks to encourage people like him.

Developments in Singapore

Singapore International Foundation (SIF)'s recently held its seventh 'Ideas for a Better World' forum where Mr Mechai Viravaidya, founder of Thailand's Population and Community Development Association (PDA), expressed the need to cultivate new generations of social entrepreneurs. He also added that Singapore is the best Southeast Asian country to do so.

At the opening launch of the **Social Enterprise Association** in October 2009, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports, expressed that while doing good is important, the business should still strive to be profitable and thus, sustainable. Social entrepreneurs should see the value in the people they are trying to help, rather than seeing the beneficiaries as lacking.

"We're not asking for special favours. Don't give the contract simply because it's a social enterprise. But be open-minded, look at what they're offering, if they offer good value for money, give them a chance. That's all we're asking." said Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, whose ministry has since committed S\$5.5 million to fund 73 social enterprises.

Nevertheless, despite the lack of public awareness towards social enterprises, a survey conducted by the Social Enterprise Association showed that more than half of its respondents are willing to support social enterprises if they are familiar with it.

Contributing to society is the biggest motivating factor for those who support social enterprises.



About **Fiona R.**

Apart from exploring new places, Fiona has diverse interests that cannot be limited to a short paragraph like this. A firm believer in taking risks and trying everything at least once, the only things that stop her in her quest for experience are fear-factor inspired food (innards included!) and bugs. Taking a keen interest in learning about things she doesn't already know, Fiona has found the entrepreneurship scene to be a good learning platform.