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STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

Q&A

David Gergen

SSIR Academic Editor Jim Phills spoke with former presidential advisor David Gergen about his desire for the federal government to champion social entrepreneurs

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Fall 2008

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David Gergen believes that the federal government should do more to support social innovation.

DAVID GERGEN IS ONE OF America's best-known political pundits. And well he should be. Having spent three decades as advisor to Presidents Nixon, Ford, Reagan, and Clinton, Gergen knows as much about what goes on inside the Beltway as anyone.

What most people don't know is that Gergen is also an astute observer of social innovation. From his perch at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government (where he is a professor of public service and director of the Center for Public Leadership), Gergen has taken an active role in not just studying social entrepreneurship, but also championing it.

One of the things Gergen has done recently is to encourage social entrepreneurs to

become more active in national politics. Last year, he helped launch America Forward, a nonpartisan coalition of about 60 nonprofits (including City Year, Jumpstart, Teach for America, and BUILD) that are attempting to get the federal government more engaged with nonprofits in developing innovative solutions to social problems. America Forward is developing public policy in this area and trying to get presidential candidates Barack Obama and John McCain to adopt the coalition's ideas.

In this interview with James A. Phills Jr., the *Stanford Social Innovation Review's* academic editor, Gergen discusses his views on social innovation, why social entrepreneurs should be more engaged in politics, and how the federal government can work with and even fund social entrepreneurs.

James A. Phills Jr.: You've been one of the most prominent supporters of social entrepreneurs. What attracted you to this field?

David Gergen: My first visit to City Year was electrifying. They asked me to come over and speak at a meeting of their directors, and there was so much vitality in the room that I came back and said, "I'm almost ready to give up my day job and go over there and work with them." It was fun, it was exciting, and they were doing important things. Later on, I met Wendy Kopp [president and founder of Teach for America] and began to understand what Teach for America was doing.

I came to appreciate that there was what can only be called a movement springing up in our midst. I began to pay a lot more attention to them and realize, wow, this can make an enormous difference in the life of the country.

Social entrepreneurs, both nonprofit and for-profit, remind me of the Civil Rights movement because they share the same idealism. Although the two movements are very different and are going about things in very different ways, social entrepreneurs could have almost as big an impact on the country over time.

A couple of years ago, you exhorted social entrepreneurs to engage with policymakers and public officials. And clearly since then, the community has embraced that advice. One manifestation of this is the coalition of nonprofits America Forward. Why did you believe it was important to connect social entrepreneurs and public officials?

First, one of the greatest challenges facing social entrepreneurs is getting to scale. About 100 nonprofits are launched every day, according to one report. But the num-

ber of nonprofits that grow to have \$20 million annual budgets is tiny. So the scale issue hits you right between the eyes. The government, however, has all the money. Anybody who's spent any time in Washington or in state government recognizes that the level of funding there is vastly higher. If you could unite the energy, ideals, and innovativeness of social entrepreneurs with the resources of government, you would have a powerhouse.

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Second, one of the main lessons of my entire career has been that if you want to change things, it's really important to get the policies of government aligned with the change.

Third, I didn't want to be too cynical about this, but I said, “You social entrepreneurs have essentially convinced yourselves that you don't want to be involved with government and you don't want to be involved in politics, thinking that you'll be compromised and that it's ineffectual.” For whatever reason, many social entrepreneurs believe they are filling in the gaps left by a government that's uncaring or not sufficiently serious about social issues.

So I said, “There are a lot of people on the conservative side who are determined to prevent government from extending [social] services because they want to leave that to private individuals. And whether you like it or not, that conservative movement's been very successful. If you social entrepreneurs who see yourselves as more progressive leave the arena to the conservatives,

they'll beat you every time on public policy. They'll let you go spend your time trying to fill in the gaps while they spend their time winning elections. You'll never get to where you want to be unless you engage in the political arena, too.”

Now to be fair, on some issues such as education, some conservatives are much closer to the social entrepreneurs than people understand. There's much more support for charter schools, for example, and for other kinds of reforms that I happen to be-

lieve in, among Republicans than there is among Democrats.

If the government were to start providing lots of funding for social entrepreneurs, could they absorb that level of investment? Could City Year or Teach for America grow to 10 times their size and still be effective?

That's an important question. Clearly, some could not absorb a large infusion of money and still be effective. There are others who could grow to that size. But just pouring money into the social entrepreneurship movement is not a good idea. It would need to be done with great care to ensure that these organizations don't fall on their faces. It takes time to build these organizations. You can't build an institution overnight. It's an organic process.

But look at Teach for America. We had 18,000 applications this last year for 2,900 spots. [Gergen sits on Teach for America's board of directors.] They are the biggest single recruiter on some college campuses. Could we be four times as large in five years? That would be very hard. But could it be larger? Yes, it could. And would we get more bang in education if you took the Teach for America model and built it up? Yes, I think we would.

Is there much support in Washington for the federal government to increase its role in the nonprofit sector?

I think there is a spirit out there to increase the size of our national service commit-

ment. For the first time we have two candidates who support a significant increase in AmeriCorps. So I'm very encouraged about the direction politics is starting to take, but I have to tell you, there is still resistance in Congress. It's one of the places where you find conservatives saying: “Not so fast. This is not true volunteerism if you pay somebody.” My argument is: “Wait a minute, I thought we had something called an all-volunteer Army? And we are paying them, as we should. How is it different?” Also, a number of companies are now starting to incorporate social ends in their plans, and I have no problem with that. Just the opposite. I think it's good.

Recent polling data suggest that the underlying principles of social entrepreneurship, if not the term itself, appeal both to conservatives and liberals. Given our partisan political environment, how do you explain the bipartisan appeal of social entrepreneurship? Are liberals and conservatives embracing the same idea or different parts of social entrepreneurship?

They're embracing somewhat different parts of social entrepreneurship, but they have some of the same underlying principles. One of those principles is that government is often not the best vehicle for solving social problems. The traditional liberal view has been that government is the vehicle of first resort for fixing health care, education, or welfare. Social entrepreneurs, however, have seen government fail at a lot of those issues, because of either omission or commission. So they have come to believe that problems are better tackled through civil society, or alternatively, through the private for-profit sector. Conservatives have long believed that problems are best solved by people outside the governmental sphere.

My argument, and I think social entrepreneurs are now seeing this, is that social entrepreneurs need the government's help as a partner and a financial supporter. The government shouldn't take over these programs. Instead, I think we're looking at new forms of social problem solving in which government enters into partnerships with social entrepreneurial organizations. The government contracts out responsibilities and then expects results.

One intriguing proposal of America Forward is to establish a White House Office of Social Innovation and Results. If President Obama or President McCain asked you to be the director of the new office, what are the first two or three things that you would do to drive social innovation?

It's extremely important that the President have this on his radar screen as one of the institutions he wishes to build and make it clear that this is one of his domestic priorities. It's also important to consider tax and other policies at the federal level that could encourage the growth of these organizations.

I don't think there's been enough policy work done yet on this issue, and that's one of the things America Forward is trying to do—figure out what policies



and local governments. I just spent all day yesterday reviewing the winners.

What I've seen through that process is that innovation in government is also extraordinarily important. There are lots of places where this is under way—Smart Start in North Carolina, for example. We're seeing government use technology in ways that nobody could have imagined some years ago. We're also seeing that partnerships among various governmental groups, or between government and nonprofits, can be very, very rewarding. That's why I think that social entrepreneurs ought to be joining

with those pushing innovation in government to raise the standards and effectiveness of all of our social institutions.

It's also incredibly important for the White House to build up a

Is it the size of the classroom? Is it the dedication of the teachers? Is it the quality of the teachers? There seem to be gaps in our understanding.

The definition of social entrepreneurship is a contested one. But many people believe it comprises nonprofits and newly formed organizations. From your experience and observations, do you think that subset of organizations is any better or more effective than the government, the private sector, or large established nonprofits?

One danger that social entrepreneurs need to avoid is to become too pure or elitist in their views of how best to go about solving social problems. There are those who believe that social entrepreneurs should by definition be nonprofit. I don't share that view. Nancy Barry, who started the nonprofit Women's World Banking, has formed a for-profit organization to fight poverty in five countries. She is outstanding. Should we somehow think that Nancy Barry is no longer a social entrepreneur? That's nonsense. The issue is how do we solve problems, not what form the vehicle takes. For Nancy Barry, creating a for-profit is the only way she's going to get to scale. So I'm a believer that both for-profits and nonprofits are fighting the same good fight.

What about larger, more established nonprofits? What role do they play?

Many people in traditional larger nonprofits have taken offense at the notion that you are a social entrepreneur only if you're new. A self-righteous quality can creep into the conversations of people who are doing something new. In truth, a lot of people have committed themselves to social change and have done great work. They should all be celebrated and seen as partners in the larger struggle—not as somehow second class.

I don't think we are by any means at the end of this journey in terms of producing a movement. There are going to be some twists and turns and setbacks along the way. All of us have to remember that the overriding issues are reducing inequity, providing equal opportunity for everyone in our own country, and healing problems in the world. Those goals should transcend differences and method. ■

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might make a difference in advancing these organizations. And yet there is a backlash going on in some state legislatures that are looking at ways to tax nonprofits. That would be a clear setback to this whole effort. In fact, one of the things I cannot understand is conservatives who argue they don't want the government to take over these issues and want to leave it to the private sector, but then argue, “Let's tax nonprofits.” At some point you have to ask: “Do you want these problems solved or not? Is there anybody you'd like to see do this, or do you just want to get everybody off the field?”

There is also a great deal of innovation going on within government. Should the new office get involved in that as well?

Innovation in government is also extraordinarily important. If we can establish an Office of Social Innovation and Results it ought to be encouraging innovation within government itself, too. Some years ago, the Ford Foundation started an awards program called Innovations in American Government. I've been chair of the selection committee for the last 10 to 12 years. We get about 1,000 applications from federal, state,

network of allies across the country. That would include not only social entrepreneurs, but also the business community, the educational community, and others who could lend themselves to this effort.

Finally, I don't think we have done enough strong research about what works and what doesn't work in the social sector. Do we know who should shoulder what responsibility? If we're going to have the government, the civic sector, and the for-profit sector all involved in social change, who should be doing what? What principles should guide us? How do you establish standards? How do you establish oversight? We haven't figured these questions out yet. We don't have a body of knowledge and we haven't done the empirical work that is required to build up a set of principles.

I was just visiting the Harlem Village Academy about three weeks ago. It is an extraordinarily impressive organization, but we don't have the data yet. We have anecdotal information to suggest that it is possible to achieve gains in education for children even though they come from very poor families that are broken. We know that, but we don't know enough about how it works.