

A social entrepreneur is an individual, group, network, organization, or alliance of organizations that seeks sustainable, large-scale change through pattern-breaking ideas in what governments, nonprofits, and businesses do to address significant social problems.

This definition contains eight basic assumptions about the sources, goals and strategies of social entrepreneurs; the socially-entrepreneurial organizations they either build or inherit; or the less-entrepreneurial organizations they change to full-blown socially-entrepreneurial purposes.

1. Social entrepreneurs do not have to be individuals – they can also be small groups or teams of individuals, organizations, networks, or even communities that band together to create pattern-breaking change. This assumption moves the field away from individual-centered study, while expanding the number of potential social entrepreneurs that might already exist.
2. Social entrepreneurs seek sustainable, large-scale change. This assumption, which adopts the prevailing goal-oriented nature of the contemporary debate, nonetheless moves the field away from questions about who becomes an entrepreneur to what they seek, while again expanding the number of potential social entrepreneurs that might exist.
3. Social entrepreneurship can involve pattern-breaking ideas in either how or what gets done to address significant social problems. This assumption moves the field toward a broader definition of social entrepreneurship that includes organizational and administrative reforms, as well as “using old stuff in new ways”⁹
4. Social entrepreneurs exist in and between all sectors. This assumption opens the discussion beyond nonprofits to include other sectors and multi-sectoral entities. Social entrepreneurship may be more difficult to launch and sustain in government, for example, where the penalties for risk-taking are immediate, but it exists nonetheless. Again, it also embraces Dees’ and Anderson’s notion of “sector-bending” organizations that use elements of nonprofit and for-profit thinking.
5. Social entrepreneurs need not engage in social enterprise or use market-based tools to be successful. This assumption breaks the necessary-but-non-sufficient relationship between social enterprise and social enterprise by rendering earned income as one of many possible means to a social-purpose end. As Dees (2004) recently writes, “Successful social entrepreneurs will use the most effective structures, strategies, and funding mechanisms to achieve their social objectives. Social entrepreneurship should not be seen as a funding strategy, and it should not be tied to the idea of business ventures. At its heart, entrepreneurship is about establishing new and better ways to create value” (p.17).
6. The quantity of social entrepreneurship can vary greatly across individuals and entities. Some social entrepreneurs will be very entrepreneurial compared to others, while others may restrict their entrepreneurial activity to a particular program or unit. This assumption allows for comparisons across individuals and entities that are very, fairly, or only somewhat entrepreneurial, which may yield valuable knowledge on the conditions that might permit greater activity, as well as the conditions that might make lower levels of entrepreneurship quite appropriate.

7. The intensity of social entrepreneurship can and does ebb and flow over time as circumstances change. This assumption allows further study of the economic, political, social, and organizational conditions that might explain stall points, pauses, stops, and restarts in socially-entrepreneurial activity. Under this assumption, social entrepreneurs can occasionally look very non-entrepreneurial as they consolidate, retrench, or respond to inevitable external pressures. Challenge the conventional wisdom, and the conventional wisdom will almost always challenge back.
8. Social entrepreneurs sometimes fail, though at as-yet-to-be-determined rates. Much as they may seek to create pattern-breaking change, they face serious barriers to success, not the least of which is the tendency of the status quo to push back against pattern-breaking change. That is after all, the way the status quo endures.

Research on Social Entrepreneurship: Understanding and Contributing to an Emerging Field.
Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action. Occasional Paper Series,
Volume 1, Number 3. Editor Rachel Mosher-Williams. 2006

Light, Paul C. Searching for Social Entrepreneurs: Who Might They Be, Where They Might Be Found,
What They Do. pp. 30-31.