SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP: INNOVATION AT THE SERVICE OF SOCIAL CHANGE

An interview with

ELA BHATT

“The best innovations are often obvious ones. SEWA’s innovation is thinking of poor women as resourceful workers who produce wealth for themselves, for other citizens and for the nation.”

Ela Bhatt is one of the most renowned social activists in the world. In the early 1970s, she founded India’s Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), a trade union of poor, self-employed women workers. She was also a member of the Indian Parliament between 1986 and 1989 and is a trustee of the Rockefeller Foundation. Ela Bhatt also founded the Cooperative Bank of SEWA with the aim of facilitating women’s financial independence through microcredit loans. In 2007, she became a member of The Elders, an international organization of some of the world’s leading advocates of social change.

Her constant effort to improve the living standards of poor people has been recognized through a long list of awards such as the Global Fairness Initiative Award, the George Meany-Lane Kirkland Human Rights Award, and the French Legion of Honor. She also has received honorary doctorates from Harvard, Yale and the University of Natal.

With such a curriculum, it comes as no surprise that she was invited to address the global meeting of United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 2011, even though this honor is usually reserved for heads of state.

SEWA (http://www.sewa.org/index.asp) now has more than 1.2 million members in nine Indian states. It is not only an organization, but also a movement that is highly influenced by the teachings of Gandhi. SEWA therefore organizes women to ensure their self-reliance and collective action.
Chair: SEWA is an organization that focuses on poor women. Why did you decide that this social group, instead of others, was relevant to generate a significant change in your society?

Ela Bhatt: Because they are the most honest, the most hard-working and yet they are poor. This was a challenge and an opportunity. The focus is on poor, self-employed women. They are organized into a trade union and trade cooperatives.

Chair: In many definitions of social entrepreneurship, it is common to find the term “innovation.” To what extent do you consider it important for a social entrepreneurship project to be novel? In your case, what do you think is the most innovative aspect of SEWA?

EB: The best innovations are often obvious ones. SEWA’s innovation is thinking of poor women as resourceful workers who produce wealth for themselves, for other citizens and for the nation.

Chair: Forty years after the creation of SEWA, how do you measure the achievements obtained over the years?

EB: The work is all done by the women and so the achievement has to be measured by them. They find it worth continuing.

Chair: In your opinion, what are the key features social entrepreneurship projects should have?

EB: Social enterprise is not a project. It is a way of thinking so that society and economy can both benefit. The main feature is to focus on both, not just one, in all activities and results.

Chair: Do you believe that the public sector should get more involved in social entrepreneurship projects like the Obama administration did with the creation of the Social Investment Fund? What benefits or threats can you see as a result of deeper involvement?

EB: I do not know enough about the Social Investment Fund. But I do think more investments must be made in the work and enterprise of poor and honest women’s endeavors worldwide. Invest where it matters the most and share the risks of these enterprises.