

Paper Title: Endeavouring for Economic Certainty through Social Innovations

By: Noor Din

Presented at the Annual Conference of Association for Nonprofits and Social Economy

Research (ANSER-ARES), May 30 - June 1, 2012 in Waterloo, Ontario

**Conference Theme: Changing Role of Nonprofits and the Social Economy in an Uncertain
World**

Abstract

This paper argues that when 'bleak economic outlook' or job-congestion is prevailing in certain sectors of economy, there are opening up of new spaces for gainful work in other areas; and the policy community and well-connected grassroots organizations can foresee this. The paper demonstrates how innovative approaches hinging on combination of developing transferable skills for new technologies to high-skilled but floating labor force and opening of new avenues result in productive placement, redeployment of labor, and access to larger markets through social enterprises. The paper also presents a trendsetting collaboration between community-based, non-profit and the large, public funded, service providers.

Endeavouring for Economic Certainty through Social Innovations

In line with the ANSER Conference's theme for 2012, the paper shares evidence based experience from the work of a non-profit organization in Ontario, which relates to the following four sub-themes:

- Changing Role of Nonprofits and the Social Economy in an Uncertain World
- Nonprofits in a Time of Cutbacks
- Social Enterprises, Social Entrepreneurship, & Social Innovation
- Collaborations, Partnerships and Mergers

Human Endeavour (HE)

Established on the principle of self-reliance, Human Endeavour has served diverse communities in York Region and the GTA since 2005 by offering a set of quality services in areas of seniors' health and wellness, skills enhancements, community development, social economy, environment and green energy. Not only being a leading provider of health and wellness services to seniors in York Region and the GTA, Human Endeavour in 2010 also won the prestigious Innovation Award from Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care and Ontario Hospital Association for its Healthy Outcomes of Preventive Engagements (HOPE) program for seniors.

The evidence and experiences shared in this paper demonstrate some innovative approaches that helped the organization to continue serving clients successfully and sustainably in economically uncertain times which followed cutbacks on the non-profit sector. The cutbacks and their consequences validated Human Endeavour's policy of self reliance. These cuts impelled many non-profits to envisage innovations, which HE has been promoting all along such as to step into entrepreneurial ventures which help generating revenue for their community programs and by carving out a role to supplement the services of for-profit sector as well as public funded service providers.

The evidence shows that social economy offers the best breeding space for innovations by non-profits which are 'light-on-self' and enjoy steady support of communities they serves. The term 'light-on-self' refers to blend of low overhead costs, optimal utilization of high value volunteers, dedicated leadership and ownership by communities such organizations are based in and serve.

When the non-profit organizations step into non-traditional sectors often considered a domain of the for-profit sector, the former have to improvise, improve and innovate in order to be at par with the highly competitive businesses entities by imbibing, adopting and adapting to the for-profit entities' innovation, efficiency, cost effectiveness and high professional standards.

Non-profit organizations are usually perceived to be deficient in technical capacity due to a lack of resources required to engage and afford highly skilled personnel. Human Endeavour filled this gap by a three pronged strategy which entailed collaboration with professional organizations and research institutions; bringing on board highly skilled expertise in voluntary and advisory capacity; and, hiring the professional staff as well, where it was necessary.

With the above backdrop, this paper shares three examples of Human Endeavour led projects i.e., Green Energy Project, the EPIC Mart and the Adult Day Program for Frail Seniors. The two examples showcase innovations that helped open new spaces for skilled, floating, displaced and vulnerable labor force in social enterprises employing acquisition of new skills and interfacing these with new technology. The first example of green energy project shows that redeployment of vulnerable labor force, comprising newcomers and those facing lay-offs, through acquisition of transferable skills is both a replicable and scalable innovation. The second example of EPIC Virtual Mart shows how Human Endeavour blended technology and traditional craftsmanship in ably providing inclusive access to new markets to producers from marginalized communities who otherwise would not have engaged with global market. The third examples, however, shows a possible, and replicable, trend of collaborations between the small community-based organizations like Human Endeavour and the large scale, publically funded, service providers, like York Central hospital, Vaughan community Health Centre.

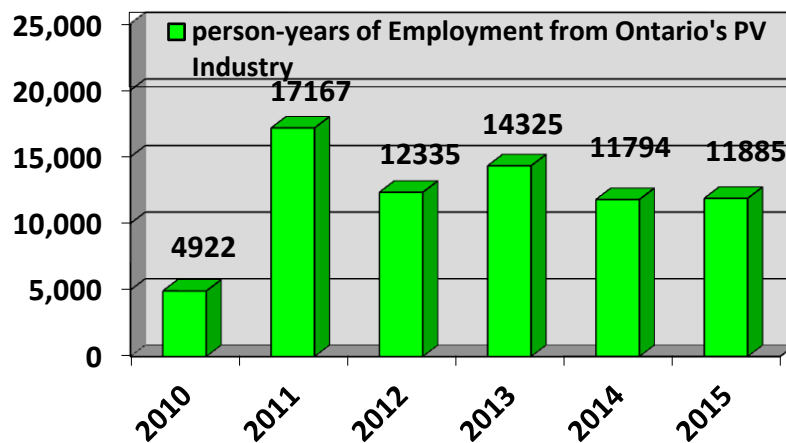
The Green Energy Project: Enhancing employability in times of recession

The paper asserts that when the so-called bleak economic outlook or job-congestion has taken over certain sectors of the economy, there are always new spaces for gainful work that open up in new areas. However, this shift is mainly visible to the well-informed *policy community*. The term *policy community* refers to people and entities who actively seek to inform and reform public policy

through rigorous research and evidence-based advocacy. Nevertheless, some grassroots organizations with eye for innovation and grasp of the big picture of socio-economic changes are also able to foresee the shifting sands of opportunity and vulnerability.

A recent survey¹ commissioned by the Canadian Solar Industries Association (CanSIA) about solar labour market found that despite an anticipated doubling of the workforce by 2012, more than half of Canadian solar companies would face severe labour shortages, with installer positions accounting for 78% of all unmet demand, followed closely by system designers (51%), project managers (40%), and engineers (40%). This shows that although there is acute shortage of traditional jobs in Ontario at this time but green energy sector of the economy is expanding rapidly, creating thousands of long term jobs in Ontario. Unprecedented growth in the Green Economy, coupled with an evident shortage of skilled labour in this area creates remarkable opportunities for organizations and individuals who are ready to make it their new career by undergoing requisite capacity building and thus meeting professional & industry standards.

Table: 1² Statistics from Employment from Photovoltaic (PV) industry in Ontario



¹ <http://www.renewableenergyworld.com/rea/partner/solar-academy-international/news/article/2010/04/solar-panel-installation-training-center-launches-in-ontario-5-day-courses-scheduled-monthly>

² Ref: <http://www.renewableenergyworld.com/rea/news/article/2010/12/how-much-does-a-solar-job-cost-in-ontario>

Realizing the opportunity, Human Endeavour decided to develop its technical capability in order to be able to offer quality trainings of Certified Photovoltaic (PV) System Installers. It is pertinent to note that in a 'tight labour market'³ it is easy to find a job in the evolving and expanding sectors, as employers are willing to hire people with reasonable skills, then provide them in house and on-job trainings to prepare them for new work.

This was the understanding which convinced Human Endeavour to step into green energy sector. Human Endeavour won the project from the Regional Municipality of York through competitive bidding process which also involved bids from the private sector companies. The project aims to train 24 Ontario Works' clients over an 18 months period. In class technical training and field placement will be provided through a partnership with SolarGrid Energy. People who are trained under this project will also be supported in finding employment in this area. Human Endeavour will setup a social enterprise / practice firm for clients to get work place experience and provide solar PV installation services; this will also result in work opportunities for some of the people trained.

Social Enterprises, Social Entrepreneurship & Social Innovation

Human Endeavour helps new immigrants and other marginalized groups to set up enterprises and earn a living. Enterprise Promotion and Innovation Centre (EPIC⁴) is a project of Human Endeavour and partners that supports marginalized community members willing to become entrepreneurs, enter the work force and participate in economic activities. Human Endeavour was providing marketing support to such enterprises from the very beginning of the EPIC project.

³ A "tight" labor market has more jobs than workers. In a "slack" labor market, the reverse applies.

⁴ EPIC, A social enterprise incubator. A project of Human Endeavour in partnership with Elder Connections, New Hope United Church, Punjabi Community Health Services, RonoSys, Seneca College, Vaughan Citizen/York Region Media Group, Vaughan Community Health Centre, Vaughan Business Enterprise Centre. Funded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation & United Way of York Region

However, recently it created a virtual shopping mall where these entrepreneurs can market and sell their products. Here is a link to the mall: <http://www.epicmart.ca>

In setting up EPIC Virtual Mart, Human Endeavour used latest web-based technologies that enable various entrepreneurs and producers from the marginalized communities to market their merchandise of traditional craftsmanship. The users & beneficiaries of the EPIC Mart are individuals who otherwise would not have engaged with the global market so productively.

The online stores not only have a global outreach, they also have fewer overheads and are easy to maintain. Human Endeavour provides multiple services to the enterprises it sets up or those which are already established by members of the marginalized groups; and the set of services provided are in the realm of technical backstopping, and marketing support. Human Endeavour charges a small fee for these services which help the organization in generating revenue for sustaining its community serving programs and operations.

Enterprises set up by Human Endeavour are gradually moving towards financial sustainability.

They are providing employment opportunities to members of marginalized groups and also bringing profits for Human Endeavour enabling it to continue its programs even in difficult times when there are financial cuts backs or less money is available for non-profits to serve.

Table 2: Revenue generated by EPIC enterprises since June 2011

EPIC Statistics	
Social Enterprises in EPIC incubator (2012)	13
Marginalized community members Involved	50+
Revenue	
2011 (June-December)	
Products & Services	\$6000
2012	
Products and services (January-May 2012)	\$19020
Trainings Green Energy/Solar PV Installers (March 2012-September 2013)	\$94860

Setting a Trend for Broad-based Collaborations

With life expectancy continuing to rise, more and more people are in need of assistance as they grow older. There is increasing recognition in Canada of the fact that its rising aging population requires augmented services without expanding traditional allocations to conventional service providers, which could best be achieved through collaborations with not-for-profit entities who have demonstrated track record of serving communities, the seniors in this case, in socially sensitive setting with culturally compatible services. Such collaborations will yield multiple benefits by offering highly competitive services at far lower costs.

On the request and insistence of the communities it serves, Human Endeavour started an Adult Day Program for Frail Seniors (HOPE-ADP). The program is a joint venture of Human Endeavour, Vaughan Community Health Centre and York Central Hospital and aims to provide care and wellness services to frail seniors in socially sensitive and culturally compatible settings. The Program hinges on self-help and broad-based collaboration, and builds on the approach of optimal utilization of existing resources by sharing of facilities and expertise. It is supported by generous community donations; however, to uphold the self-respect and the dignity of the participants, a nominal fee is charged corresponding to the participant's income.

Such programs, when managed by community-based organizations benefit the participants and their caregivers as well as the healthcare system. The participants benefit from socializing with one another and receive needed care while caregivers benefit by getting a break from caregiving duties, knowing that their loved ones are in the hands of people they trust and get culturally and linguistically appropriate services. The health system benefits through reduced healthcare costs as the seniors stay in cost effective community settings and don't utilize acute services - which are more expensive as they incur higher per capita cost.

The program is still in its infancy, but it foretells a trend where public funded entities like hospitals and health institutions can collaborate with community-based and grassroots non-profits to provide preventive and support services at lower cost but higher efficiency.

This partnership shows that in uncertain times when there are significant cuts on healthcare sector, innovative solutions are needed to maintain and increase services. It makes a lot of sense to realign and improve the efficiency of healthcare system by building the capacity of community-based groups and devolving certain services which can be delivered more effectively by them. Hospitals and other health services also benefit from this arrangement by averting avoidable visits to emergency departments and by focusing on efficient delivery of acute services.

Conclusion

While commenting on the changing role of non-profits in an uncertain world, this paper has tried to present a new way forward for the non-profit sector by presenting evidence from three initiatives of Human Endeavour, a non-profit organization working in Ontario.

These initiatives are examples of social innovations and offer a model which could be replicated and expanded to keep the negative effects of cutbacks, squeezing allocations and shrinking spaces at bay. These are also examples of social enterprises which are not shy of partnerships, collaborations. However, such innovations need to be supported by the provincial and federal governments as a matter of policy routine, and should not be left to incidental success.

Noor Din migrated to Canada in 1990 and obtained Master's Degree in Computer Engineering from University of Toronto. Currently, he is the CEO of Human Endeavour (www.humanendeavour.org) that he founded in 2004 after having worked two decades in technology industry in Pakistan and Canada.