Glasgow Caledonian University
Social Business, health, and wellbeing-Researching poverty alleviation through third sector initiatives in Scotland

Introduction

Reinforcing its commitment to the ‘Common Weal’ (the Common Good), Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) established the Yunus Centre for Social Business & Health in 2010. The aim of the Yunus Centre is to develop and support social action to meet major societal challenges, and carry out research to continuously improve the value of such action.

Our hope is that Glasgow Caledonian University’s Yunus Centre provides a model for PRME principle 4 (research) within ‘modern’ universities, creating a socially impactful area of academic endeavour in line with its mission, and achieved through enabling:

1. the world’s first centre of excellence in the field of ‘social business and health’;
2. comprehensive frameworks of outcomes and instruments for evaluating future social-business innovation from perspectives of social cohesion, health and well-being;
3. a compelling evidence base for social business as a health and well-being intervention, through quantitative and qualitative methods of enquiry;
4. development of multi-disciplinary research capacity in an area of major and growing international importance.

‘Social business and health’ is a subject for our time, reflecting the need to think and act differently at this key juncture in our history, aspiring to evidence-based sustainable well-being for all.

Thus, through the development of new conceptual frameworks and evaluating the impacts of new ways of ‘doing business,’ this initiative embodies the spirit of Principle 4 (Research) of the PRME Principles. At the same time, Principle 6 (Dialogue) is also key to this work, given that it involves dialogue and collaboration with multiple stakeholders.

Challenges

By any standards, the UK has world class health services; yet health inequalities continue to grow. This is one aspect of wider social inequality, not least in terms of income, reflected more widely in Europe and disproportionately in some regions. One quarter of Glasgow’s citizens are defined as deprived, with life expectancy gaps, shown in the work of Sir Michael Marmot, of up to 28 years between richest and poorest.

Public health initiatives focussing on individual risk factors, such as diet or exercise, need to be complemented by interventions acting further back along the chain of causality. If low income, societal exclusion and hopelessness kill people prematurely, then we need to work on such ‘causes of the causes’ through more holistic interventions that come from communities themselves. These might be enhanced via encouragement of self-help and change from a culture of dependency. This has led to a convergence of thinking about the need for entities, such as social businesses, that focus on people and...
communities as assets to be built upon, with solutions coming largely from them rather than imposed from outside. This requires parallel development of approaches to measuring ‘economic success’, accounting for broader aspects of well-being - see New Economics Foundation at www.neweconomics.org.

Actions taken

Social business has existed in various forms since the 18th century, but has not been viewed as or evaluated as a public health intervention. Despite recent focus on social business as an alternative provider of health services, researchers in Glasgow Caledonian University’s Yunus Centre are thinking of it in a much-wider and more-exciting role; acting on broader and structural determinants of health. Lying outside traditional service-focussed arenas, social businesses are characterised by having a social (not profit-led) mission and a trading function, with no share ownership or dividends paid in the event of surplus. Any surplus is ‘ploughed back’ into the community served in line with the mission. In addressing conditions of society’s most vulnerable, almost all social businesses could claim to act upon ‘upstream’ determinants of health.

This cutting-edge thinking matches the European Commission’s placement of social innovation at the heart of its vision for ‘Europe 2020’ and the World Health Organisation’s promotion of assets-based approaches to health. Bringing together expressed requirements to address needs and measure success differently, and working across the Glasgow School for Business and Society and GCU’s School of Health and Life Sciences, GCU’s Yunus Centre is developing a new scientific interface, conceptualising and evidencing ‘social business as a public health and well-being intervention’.

Results

Since its creation in 2010, the work of GCU’s Yunus Centre has gained international recognition, creating the social actions and accompanying research environment for new pathways to health and well-being to thrive. Major examples are:

- establishment and evaluation of Grameen Caledonian College of Nursing in Bangladesh, officially opened by HRH the Princess Royal in March 2011. This social enterprise addresses serious social needs, and provides professional training to the disadvantaged;
- facilitating the partnership of Grameen and Tesco Banks, to bring affordable microcredit for entrepreneurship to the most deprived parts of the UK;
- establishment of an exciting and young cadre of academic staff and postgraduate researchers. Their task is to develop evaluation frameworks of a longitudinal mixed-method nature, permitting as rigorous attribution of outcomes to social business innovations as is possible. So far, funding has been captured from the Medical Research Council and NIHR as well as national and international donors – the Church of Scotland, Santander Bank and the Nike Foundation;
- building potential for cross-cultural comparisons, not only involving lower-income countries but through GCU’s establishment of a campus in New York City and growing links with the State University of New York.
The role of PRME/sustainability principles

- This research advances our understanding about the role, dynamics, and impact of social business in the creation of sustainable social and economic value.

- The collaborative approach extends our knowledge of the challenges in meeting social and economic responsibilities and promotes dialogue to explore effective approaches to meeting these challenges.