

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION REVIEW

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*10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Essays*  
**Toward an Open-Solution Society**  
By J. Gregory Dees

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iHub in Nairobi two and a half years ago, to see what would happen if the Kenyan tech community had a place of its own. We now count 9,700 members, a true cross-section of Nairobi's tech community, including people from academia, government, corporate multinationals, and startups, as well as investors.

Whether or not the rest of the world understands Africa's emerging powers, the big tech companies certainly do. Viewing Africa as the last blue ocean of consumer demand for technology, with a growing middle class, big tech is starting to invest. Google, Nokia, and Samsung have been here for a while; IBM opened a large research facility in Kenya; Microsoft and Intel have renewed their push of mobile devices and tablets. And that's just in Nairobi. Similar investments are being made in Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, South Africa, and Egypt.

What is the single common denominator behind all of these developments? Mobile phones, the device in everyone's pocket, the technology that has cracked open the world to a billion new people. It's hard to overstate how much mobile phones have changed the shape and form of life in Africa. Every stratum, every fiber of the fabric of life here has changed because of mobile phones. The last decade has seen dramatic change in Africa, and the next decade promises even more.

ERIK HERSMAN is a co-founder of Ushahidi, a free and open source platform for crowdsourcing information and visualizing data. He is the founder of the website AfriGadget and of Nairobi's iHub, and he is a partner in the Savannah Fund, which provides seed capital for African tech startups.



# TOWARD AN OPEN-SOLUTION SOCIETY

BY J. GREGORY DEES

**W**e are moving toward a more open-solution society, one in which people of all walks of life are encouraged to apply their creativity and talents to crafting innovative solutions to social problems and increasing their impact. The democratization of social innovation is driven by a range of factors, from cultural shifts to advances in information and communications technology. *Stanford Social Innovation Review (SSIR)* has been making and will continue to make a significant contribution to this movement.

This is a good thing. Societies around the world are facing significant social problems for which they often do not have (or at least have not implemented) effective and affordable solutions. As they struggle, they also face significant uncertainty and rapid changes (from population shifts to technological advances) that result in new, complex, and shifting problems, and that open the

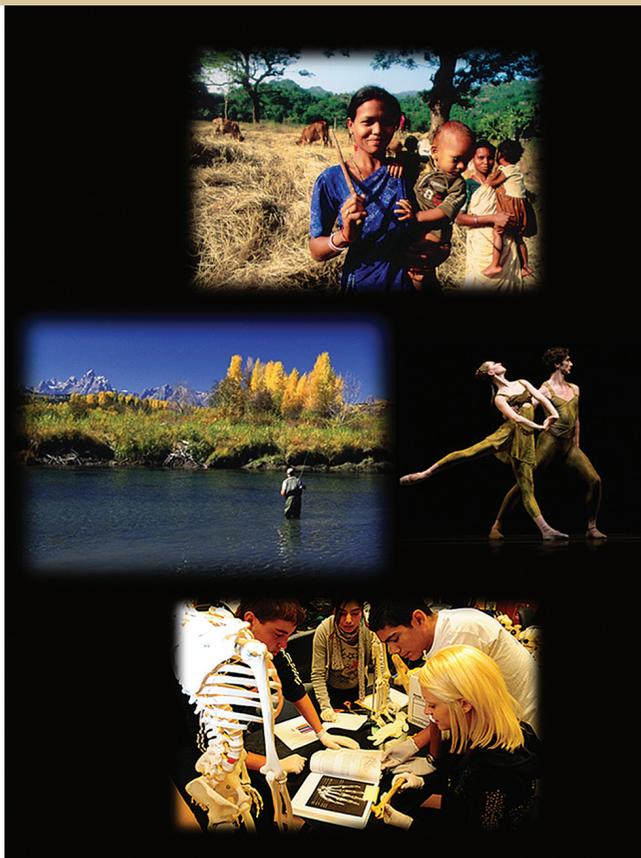
## Congratulations SSIR

Congratulations on ten terrific years of informed analysis that helps global leaders address our most pressing social and environmental challenges. We look forward to *SSIR's* continued success in the years to come. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, a proud supporter of *SSIR* since its inception.

*The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation makes grants in education, environment, global development and population, performing arts, philanthropy, and to support disadvantaged communities in the San Francisco Bay Area.*



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door to new kinds of solutions. To navigate these choppy waters, they need to be more innovative, flexible, and adaptive.

The need for adaptation is not new. Stanford University historian Ian Morris observed, in his sweeping review of the shifting balance of global power, *Why the West Rules—For Now*, that history can be defined as “a single grand relentless process of adaptations to the world that always generate new problems that call for further adaptations.” Our times make it even more urgent that societies

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—J. GREGORY DEES, Duke University



find a path to greater adaptability.

How do societies become more adaptive? For advice on this question, we need look no further than Douglass North, winner of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Science. He introduced the concept of “adaptive efficiency,” which concerns a society’s dynamic ability to solve problems over time. North explains in his classic *Institutions, Institutional Change, and Economic Performance*, “Adaptive efficiency, therefore, provides the incentives to encourage the development of decentralized decision-making processes that will allow societies to maximize the efforts required to explore alternative ways of solving problems.” Decentralized problem-solving is the essence of an open-solution society.

At the heart of such a society lies social entrepreneurship, which is the epitome of a decentralized exploration of alternative solutions to social problems. Through their innovations, experimentation, and persistent efforts, social entrepreneurs expand the portfolio of options available for dealing with current and future social and environmental issues, thus providing an essential ingredient for enhancing adaptive efficiency.

Yet entrepreneurial exploration is not enough. It can lead to fragmentation, frustration, and confusion, if it is not done within an institutional framework that helps us assess, evaluate, and appropriately scale the most promising of the experimental efforts. Markets guide this process in the case of business entrepreneurship, but the success of decentralized social problem-solving depends on the effectiveness of other supporting institutions (legal, financial, cultural, intellectual, and more) in promoting an adequate level of social entrepreneurship, improving its effectiveness, and capitalizing on what we learn through the explorations.

Creating effective solutions is not a matter of simply sorting what works from what does not work, and then scaling up what works, as some would have it. It is a matter of understanding what works *under which circumstances and for whom*. The world is more nuanced and complicated than we want to admit. Rarely is the

solution to a problem “one-size-fits-all.” We need to realize that what appears to be “best practice” has to be qualified and is usually temporary, best only until something better comes along. And we should always be challenging ourselves to do better.

For a society to use intelligently the portfolio of approaches developed by social entrepreneurs, it needs sophisticated assessment tools that capture strengths and weaknesses, as well as methods for the strategic scaling of solutions that fit the circumstances and the people involved. This process should be embedded in a continuous process of refinement and adaptation. Innovation is not finished as long as improvement is still possible. The open-solution society must seek continual evaluation and improvement. Imagine our tech world today if Apple had stopped innovating with the Apple II, just because it was “best” at the time.

We can learn from biology here. In his provocative book on the brain, *Incognito*, David Eagleman observes, “Biology never checks off a problem and calls it quits. It reinvents solutions continually. The end product of that approach is a highly overlapping system of solutions—the necessary condition for a team-of-rivals architecture.” That is how an open-solution society becomes an adaptively efficient society.

As a hub for sharing lessons, stimulating action, and encouraging engagement, *SSIR* is an important contributor to advancing an open-solution society.

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## A TEAM OF TEAMS WORLD

BY BILL DRAYTON

**T**he rate of change has been accelerating exponentially since 1700 at least. So has the number of people causing change. This acceleration also applies (and I believe this is especially important) to the number of combinations, and combinations of combinations, of changemakers collaborating.

The combined effect of these accelerating historical forces is profoundly changing how people work together. And nothing is more explosive than changes in how people interact—because they change everything.

At least since *Homo sapiens* first crossed the mouth of the Red Sea 50,000 years ago, human organization has focused on achieving efficiency in repetition. Think of the law firm or the assembly line. Consider our traditional goals for education: to give students