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Published in:
Journal of Business Venturing Insights

DOI:
10.1016/j.jbvi.2022.e00356

Published: 01/06/2023

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Please cite the original version:
Scaling the right answers – Creating and maintaining hope through social entrepreneurship in light of humanitarian crises

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Social entrepreneurship
Crises
Problem validation
Scaling
Rapid response
Russo-Ukrainian war

ABSTRACT

Triggered by the Russo-Ukrainian war starting early in 2022 and the subsequent movement of refugees toward various European countries, this rapid response paper provides five reflections on the role of social entrepreneurship in light of humanitarian crises. We validate two problems with the help of a problem owner from social entrepreneurial practice and suggest answers to them grounded in existing evidence documented in the academic literature (translational research approach). First, we show how social entrepreneurs can focus on solving the right problems in chaotic and fast-paced crises, and second, we illustrate measures to scale appropriately. Finally, on a meta-level, hope emerges as an additional answer. Even if social entrepreneurs should not address the “right” problems and even if they scale inappropriately, in light of any humanitarian crises, they still contribute value by creating hope for their societies, their stakeholders, and for themselves.

1. Introduction

Social entrepreneurs provide answers in response to pressing societal issues. While some of these issues might be inherent to society’s organization (e.g., inequality or the effects of climate change), many of them result from largely unexpected exogenous shocks. The 2015 European migrant crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the recent Russo–Ukrainian war, with its broader impact on European societies and beyond, are all telling examples. As a result, crises that we usually think of as temporary deviations from the norm have become permanent phenomena.

Policy-makers, practitioners, and academics describe these conditions as characterized by enhanced volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, summarizing them under the acronym VUCA (Bennet and Lemoine, 2014). The so-called VUCA world affects decision-making in policy and economy as well as social entrepreneurs’ answers and initiatives. Social entrepreneurs are no longer only confronted with the challenge of making the world a better place by mitigating known societal issues; they are increasingly fac-
ing the consequences of humanitarian crises. Naturally, society expects them to act upon the “opportunities” resulting from such crises.

It is this background against which we have conceptualized the present rapid response paper (see JBV1, 2021 and Chen et al., 2022, for the concept of rapid responses; Giones et al., 2020; Kuckertz et al., 2020; Muñoz et al., 2020; Farboud et al., 2021; Chalmers et al., 2022, for concrete rapid response examples), which aims to translate existing evidence to relevant problems identified in the interplay of academic and practical perspectives (Muñoz et al., 2020). In the context of social entrepreneurship and humanitarian crises, the first author and the second author (a seasoned social entrepreneur taking up the practical problem owner’s role) identified the validation and scaling of the solution to the social problems resulting from humanitarian crises as particularly relevant; these topics formed the basis of our rapid response.

The following section describes the problem owner’s situation in greater depth, argues for the relevance of these two aspects, and illustrates our procedure. We adopt a virtual round-table format in which five experts from institutions in five European countries provide their individual perspectives on the problems. Finally, we close this rapid response paper with an overarching synthesis of the individual perspectives to help social entrepreneurs scale the right answers as a reaction to humanitarian crises.

2. Problem owner, problems, and procedure

Impact Hub is a global network of currently more than 100 communities in more than 60 countries, aiming to “enable inclusive and sustainable innovation at scale” (Impact Hub, 2022: n. p.). The organization achieves this goal by connecting its members through (virtual) coworking, knowledge transfer, network building, and events meant to be inspiring for social entrepreneurs. This rapid response paper’s problem owner is the co-founder of Impact Hub Stuttgart, located in southwest Germany. Being a social entrepreneur and aiming to provide a platform for the daily work of other social entrepreneurs puts the problem owner in a unique position, allowing him to understand the market challenges for social entrepreneurship from a broader perspective and thus contributing to the “worthiness” (Chen et al., 2022) of the present rapid response paper.

Triggered by the Russo-Ukrainian war that started in 2022, the lead author and the problem owner engaged in deep discussions to understand how this war and other humanitarian crises have affected social entrepreneurship. Not only have Ukrainian citizens been affected on-site, but European countries, especially Eastern European countries, have also seen a dramatic influx of refugees from Ukraine with, for instance, consequences for integration, economic participation, or education. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2022) recorded more than seven million refugees over the year 2022 from Ukraine to Europe, with a dramatic initial wave at the beginning of the war and a constant influx of refugees over the subsequent months. In addition, many European countries’ sentiment toward security and defense policies have changed. Humanitarian crises require answers; notably, such socio-cultural, economic, and political shifts enable entrepreneurial answers (Davidsson et al., 2020; Kimjeon and Davidsson, 2021).

However, while any humanitarian crisis enables social entrepreneurship, crises that constitute a substantial exogenous shock on societies come along with particular challenges. First, private initiative is a defining criterion of social entrepreneurship. In particular, in situations characterized by extreme levels of uncertainty, we witness many unfocused and inefficient private initiatives that fail to provide a relevant solution or even worsen the situation. From a market economy perspective, ideas would compete for acceptance in the market, and it would be the market’s role to sort out viable business models. Considering social entrepreneurship as a response to humanitarian crises, such a mechanism seems undesirable. Accepting misallocation of resources and individual initiatives runs counter to humanitarian needs, and mitigating inefficiencies should be a goal. The problem becomes even more significant with inexperienced, nascent social entrepreneurs. Hence:

Problem to be solved 1: How should (nascent) social entrepreneurs ensure that their solutions adequately address the effects of a humanitarian crisis?

For social entrepreneurs already active in the market and already having established a solution, substantial humanitarian crises pose unique challenges. Generally, social entrepreneurs need to decide whether to scale their solutions broad or deep (Liu et al., 2021). A humanitarian crisis of a size such as the one triggered by the Russo-Ukrainian war can radically change the market for the solution. That is, a sudden humanitarian crisis can cause the market for some existing solutions to grow dramatically and propel the demand for a solution to entirely new levels. With the uncertainty accompanying each humanitarian crisis, social entrepreneurs face the growth dilemma of whether to scale as large as possible to alleviate as much human suffering as possible or protect their organization, which might have been inflated by scaling to an oversized level once society has mastered the humanitarian crisis. Hence:

Problem to be solved 2: How should social entrepreneurs scale appropriately in light of the uncertainty accompanying humanitarian crises?

The team tackling these problems emerged from a larger group of seasoned European academics that gathered virtually shortly after the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war to reflect upon the situation, its consequence, and necessary measures. Out of this larger group, six academics agreed to answer the situation with a rapid response. The team was composed with the goal to a) include experienced researchers in (social) entrepreneurship with a deep knowledge of the respective literature and b) to truly reflect the European situation by including institutions as diverse as possible from different European countries (i.e., Austria, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands).

The procedure started with the lead author contacting the problem owner through his networks and getting into a deep discussion to reflect upon the problems following the situation for social entrepreneurs. The lead author then condensed the debate to two concrete problems and validated these with the problem owner before handing the problems to the five colleagues, who would then write independently of each other individual perspectives. Perspectives were then aggregated and made available to the complete author.
team to allow them to adjust their initial personal views against those provided by their colleagues in this virtual round table format. Finally, as moderator of this rapid response paper, the lead author synthesized the results from the perspectives and validated the findings again with the whole author team. The result is five different perspectives that respond to the problems to be solved by discussing concrete instruments (perspectives 1 and 2) and exploring the role of different actors in the social entrepreneurial ecosystem (perspectives 3 and 4). The first four perspectives all touch upon the concept of hope as highly relevant in responding to humanitarian crises, which is why the fifth and final perspective discusses maintaining and creating hope as a meta-answer to both problems to be solved.

3. Translational perspectives on the problems to be solved

3.1. Perspective 1 – Deeply understanding crises to deliver the right answers

Addressing the correct problems and appropriately scaling solutions requires a deep understanding of the situation. Therefore, social entrepreneurs aiming to create innovative solutions to immediate social issues need to mobilize ideas, capacities, resources, and social arrangements (Alvord et al., 2004). In the context of the Russo–Ukrainian war, for instance, hope to mitigate human suffering empowers social entrepreneurs, who maybe aim to help refugees coming to the host countries. However, to address the resulting social problems efficiently and effectively, understanding refugees’ needs and situations is essential, as they are a rather heterogeneous group equipped unequally with resources and social, cultural, and financial capital (Dabić et al., 2020). Moreover, refugees struggle upon their arrival with the fulfillment of basic physiological and safety needs. They might suffer from experiencing life-threatening events preceding arrival, emotional trauma, loss or separation from family, torture, and difficulties associated with differences in the social and cultural environment and communication in foreign languages (Mahoney and Siyambalapitiya, 2017).

When creating inclusion initiatives and solutions, social entrepreneurs should consider refugees' characteristics (age, gender, and family situation), equipment with capital (previous occupation, years of experience, language skills, and education), as well as specific ties to the community (friends and family) and resources they managed to take to the host country (Harima, 2022). In addition, a key aspect should be an expectation of when or how quickly they plan to return to their home country (i.e., as soon as possible, after the country recovers from the war damages, or not at all). Such insights help entrepreneurs to develop appropriate solutions for the target refugee group they wish to empower or mobilize. Furthermore, such a process provides them with the possible time plan of the project or cooperation duration, ensuring they do not overinvest in the projects limited by the duration of refugees’ stay in the host country or those with no (economic) potential. To consider all these crucial aspects in their projects, social entrepreneurs should utilize available tools to develop their solutions and impact monitoring (e.g., the social business model canvas (Social Innovation Lab, 2022) or the logic model and its components (Social Impact Navigator, 2022))

Hubs, like the one operated by this rapid response’s problem-owner, provide social entrepreneurs with a unique opportunity to collaborate with refugees on their projects. Prior studies acknowledge that community-driven collaboration in coworking spaces and hubs can positively increase refugees’ social inclusion and connectedness by opening their doors to social, economic, and community life participation (Mahoney and Siyambalapitiya, 2017; Orel et al., 2021). Resident social entrepreneurs can then provide employment opportunities or establish business collaborations to build new relationships with the host country during significant uncertainty (Harima, 2022). However, the type of cooperation, its outcomes, and the appropriate selection of milestone indicators should follow the expected kind of cooperation, so it is beneficial to both refugees and social entrepreneurs (Rawhouser et al., 2019).

3.2. Perspective 2 – Iterative co-development to find the right answers

However, only creating a deep understanding of the situation in a humanitarian crisis is insufficient to address the right problems in the right way. Accepting that further analysis is needed to avoid idea fixation (Crilly 2018) is crucial when social entrepreneurs develop opportunities in the immediate aftermath of a humanitarian crisis. We argue that iterative co-development can overcome these issues.

Developing solutions in iterations, that is, repeatedly going through a process of validating solutions and adjusting them until a final, viable solution emerges, is a promising approach, as the context of crisis response is chaotic, ill-defined, uncertain, and information-poor (Clark and Newbert, 2018). In such contexts, entrepreneurs can use iterative strategy making such as wayfinding or effectuation (Waddock and Steckler, 2016) to develop opportunities (Vogel, 2016). Compared to unreflected action, iteration facilitates analysis (Kim et al., 2018). Compared to strategic planning, iteration helps entrepreneurs prevent idea fixation (Toivonen et al., 2022).

For example, “wayfinding” describes how local adaptations and iterations, often through interactions with stakeholders (Waddock and Steckler, 2016), help entrepreneurs develop their understanding of the problem/solution vision and target their efforts towards the highest impact. Hence, entrepreneurs avoid idea fixation by adapting to new information. Another example of iteration is the use of effectuation in crises. For example, effectuation seems effective in responding to natural disasters in developing countries. In this situation, entrepreneurs work with constrained resources in highly uncertain environments (Akinboye and Morrish, 2022). This context favors effectuation over causation. Also, following contextualized strategy making, Harms et al. (2020) found that businesses use effectuation to support the crisis response of business model innovation.

Second, social entrepreneurship can use co-development with crucial stakeholders. This combines need-based knowledge from beneficiaries with solution-based knowledge about what is organizationally and technologically feasible (von Hippel, 1994). For example, Rayamajhee et al. (2022) found that social entrepreneurs embedded in the beneficiaries’ community combine and leverage local and technical knowledge (Zahra et al., 2008). Shang et al. (2022) emphasized that help offered with the opportunity of beneficia-
ries to reciprocate and offering a sense of empowerment is perceived as more effective. Co-development can be a way to reciprocate and empower. In addition, co-development may support the feeling of hopefulness.

Iterative co-development of crisis-response actions ensures that social entrepreneurs’ solutions address the effects of humanitarian crises. Social technologies such as hackathons (Monsef et al., 2021), lean startups (Harms and Schwy, 2020), the family of social canvases (Joyce and Paquin, 2016), and design thinking (Kickul et al., 2018) can support social entrepreneurs in this task.

3.3. Perspective 3 – Social value beyond economic value – the role of women

Conflict and humanitarian crises cause displacement. When crises and displacement occur, resilience can be crucial (Bullough et al., 2014). Hope promotes resilience, especially in uncertain times (Huang et al., 2019; Ortony et al., 1988). Hope can also drive behavior and influence commitment (Huang et al., 2019; Snyder, 2002). Entrepreneurship fosters resilience and can be a way of supporting hope. Instruments and tools for social entrepreneurship are important, but especially social capital and social networks nurture entrepreneurial activity and resilience-building (Shepherd et al., 2020, 2022). As well as helping rebuild economies following a crisis like war (Doen et al., 2019), entrepreneurship has a social value that can play a role in the recovery process (Haynie and Shepherd, 2011; McKeever et al., 2015; Peredo and Chrisman, 2006).

As the Russo-Ukrainian crisis began to unfold, Sweden, for instance, saw a quietly growing trend of prosocial compassion, social responsibility, and social obligation, showing those displaced that they were not alone (Shepherd et al., 2020). Those fleeing Ukraine have primarily been women with young dependents. In Sweden, it was interesting to observe the speed at which Ukrainian and Eastern European women living in Sweden stepped in to help those displaced. With the use of social media, these “local” women informally mobilized local assistance in Sweden ahead of the arrival of the displaced, meeting immediate social needs and creating social value more quickly than traditional methods. In parallel, the unfolding humanitarian crisis brought solidarity possibly driven by local women strongly identifying themselves with those women in need, which served as a social bonding mechanism.

Skill relevance has been demonstrated in Sweden. Displaced women coming from Ukraine have faced difficulty finding employment that matches their experience, education, and qualifications. Therefore, primary income from the Swedish government has been supplemented by displaced women offering skills such as baking, cooking, tailoring, hairdressing, beauty treatments, and gardening. Many have begun to scale up these activities and formalize their practicing of entrepreneurship with what were initial offers of assistance becoming more formalized and more realistically market priced. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram have created a marketplace for trading and showcasing these activities, simultaneously allowing women to reach out beyond their immediate social ties and establish new ties while bridging structural gaps to build entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship and the gradual scaling up of activities allows them to endure their emotional and social pain, to keep busy, bide their time and build hope that things will get better so that they can return to their homeland. In creating order from disorder and finding solutions through skills and social resources these women demonstrate bricolage (Lévi-Strauss, 1962). At the same time, they are resilience-building through entrepreneurship to cope with the atrocities occurring at home (Doen et al., 2019; Shepherd et al., 2020).

In Sweden, “local” and displaced women are building a sense of community, solidarity, and social responsibility through the humanitarian crisis brought on by the Russo–Ukraine war but also through the way they are practicing entrepreneurship with women supporting women. Through this social support and in the way they are operating, they are extending their social value and social impact. The rebuilding of Ukraine will largely be driven by women. Ukraine will need to attract these women back; with the entrepreneurial skills they have developed being vital. Due to social ties and their practicing entrepreneurship in the local markets, bringing back these women who have fled will be challenging, as they will become more integrated and connected to their new communities over time. As things progress, it will be interesting to observe how these women continue to scale up their entrepreneurial activities and formalize them more, as well as how these entrepreneurial activities are used to support their homeland communities (Peredo and Chrisman, 2006; McKeever et al., 2015).

3.4. Perspective 4 – Involving volunteering communities and forming cross-sector partnerships to control scaling

The fourth perspective shares rapid reflections in particular for addressing the scaling problem. Drawing on a collaborative social entrepreneurship perspective (Montgomery et al., 2012), it argues that both the involvement of volunteering communities and the formation of cross-sector partnerships enable social entrepreneurs to efficiently “scale” their venture and its social impact and, through that, cultivate and maintain collective hope (Farny et al., 2019a) during major crises, such as the Russo–Ukrainian war.

First, many social enterprises rely on the engagement of volunteers who invest their time, skills, and effort without profiting financially. Volunteers are particularly crucial when social enterprises increase their capacities to offer immediate but also continuous support in regions that face a humanitarian crisis, for instance, to better protect and assist Ukrainian refugees helping develop their shared hope for a better future. Based on prior research (Farny et al., 2019b), we conclude that social entrepreneurs are not only able to attract volunteers in the early phases of a crisis but also to retain them for a longer period (e.g., months/years after Russia launched the military invasion of Ukraine) by continuously managing idealistic (e.g., scaling social impact) and pragmatic orientations (e.g., financial sustainability) inherent in the design of a social venture. Equally important is that entrepreneurs apply “emotion-focused” practices (e.g., energizing) that help empower volunteers and thus strengthen the emotional attachment and loyalty of volunteers to the social enterprise (Farny et al., 2019b).

Second, for social entrepreneurs to scale their social impact and help cultivate collective hope for a better future during severe crises (Farny et al., 2019a) while minimizing the risk of growing too fast and failing with their venture, it is key to form cross-sector partnerships (i.e., those involving private, public, and third-sector actors who possess relevant complementary resources and expertise) (Gillett et al., 2019). For instance, considering the uncertainty of the Russo–Ukrainian war, this can mean building long-term collaborations with other social enterprises or private and public organizations across different areas of work, such as related to (im)m-
3.5. Perspective 5 – Hope and social entrepreneurial solutions

In times of pressing crises accompanied by deaths and devastation, “there might not be much reason for optimism, but there is hope” (Neumann, 2022, n.p.), which has already been hinted at in the first four perspectives. The concept of hope lends itself to shedding light on whether social entrepreneurs are creating value in the context of the humanitarian crisis, both as an antecedent and an outcome.

According to hope theory, hope is the “perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals” (Snyder, 2002, p. 249). This definition implies similarities with entrepreneurship, especially social entrepreneurship, as they both require understanding, envisioning, and designing solutions to unmet objectives. For example, suppose social entrepreneurs aim to create value in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian crisis. In this case, hope is a valuable capability to understand needs, effectively control emotions in the entrepreneurial process, and develop pathways toward achieving ease in the immediate and pressing hardship (Arend, 2020).

However, hope as an emotion can also be viewed as an outcome and a catalyst of entrepreneurial activity. Hopefulness refers to an individual’s positive emotion in the present that the current situation will improve in the future (Greenaway et al., 2016). The impact of social entrepreneurship is defined as the value created on a social level, which is the “aggregate utility of society’s members increases after accounting for the opportunity cost of all the resources used in that activity” (Santos, 2012, p. 337). Essentially, this definition extends the emphasis on the value created for those most concerned by the crisis to other positive externalities, such as hopefulness that might arise from entrepreneurial initiatives. For example, initiatives such as #ChefsforUkraine, which seek to provide meals to refugees, not only create value by fulfilling the basic needs of refugees but also strengthen the ingroup hopefulness among refugees, which can contribute to coping with the despair.

Furthermore, entrepreneurial initiatives can provide outgroup individuals hopefulness, positively affecting their support for social change (Greenaway et al., 2016). The mechanism here might be that realizing that social entrepreneurs contribute to changing the current situation or designing solutions to ease the action paralysis induced by the stress level even outgroup individuals are facing. For instance, 80% of U.S. citizens felt stressed about the Russo-Ukrainian war in March 2022 and binge-consumed news about the crisis, which certainly also affected their opportunity costs (NPHIC, 2022).

Consequently, the assessment of the impact of social entrepreneurship in humanitarian crises needs to embrace hope and hopefulness as enablers and outcomes of entrepreneurial initiatives in the acute and long-term phases of the crisis. From this perspective, any entrepreneurial action is preferable to no action, even if it is inefficient.

4. Synthesis and conclusion

This rapid response paper asks how (nascent) social entrepreneurs can ensure that their solution adequately addresses the effects of a humanitarian crisis and how they should scale appropriately in light of the uncertainty accompanying such crises. Taken together, our perspectives argue that a deep understanding of the issues at hand is mandatory to develop effective solutions and that an iterative development of such solutions with the various available tools is a promising avenue to follow.

While the iterative development of initial solutions already encompasses the component of openness, openness to partners seems to be especially necessary for the scaling part of the social entrepreneurial process. Here, we must recognize the diversity of social problems arising from humanitarian crises and the diversity of social entrepreneurs answering to them – women play a crucial role in that (Klyver et al., 2022). Table 1 collects our recommendations of what social entrepreneurs can do.

Considering the observations in the five perspectives, exciting avenues for future research open up. For instance, are women placing greater importance on driving social value through entrepreneurship? Will social value form an integral part of their entrepreneurial process as they scale up? How can social value and solidarity contribute to entrepreneurship in humanitarian crises as ventures scale up?

Moreover, the rationale of the sequence of perspectives reaches from concrete instruments over the role of actors to hope as the meta-answer. An alternative rationale would claim that in light of humanitarian crises, social entrepreneurs should focus on problems first, then create partnerships to efficiently and effectively deal with those problems, to co-develop with partners to arrive at co-created social value and hope finally. While hope certainly plays a crucial role in all of these steps, it would add much value if future research would precisely identify the mechanisms where hope enables progress, where it is a result, and what exact consequences it triggers.

The way the problems to be solved were phrased indicate that efficiency and effectiveness are desirable when social entrepreneurs react to humanitarian crises. There is much to be said in favor of this viewpoint, but it also might run the danger of neglecting the essential and desirable consequences of social entrepreneurial activity. A relevant question in this regard is whether we would do justice to social entrepreneurship if we assess it according to the same criterion as traditional entrepreneurship. Effective or not, efficient or not, any social entrepreneurial activity is a consequence of hope and creates even more hope, which is crucial under extreme scenarios, such as large-scale humanitarian crises. We must be careful not to suppress relevant hope-creating activities by asking too much of them.

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1 We use hope as an emotion or hopefulness to differentiate from hope theory (Snyder, 2002).
### Table 1
Recommendations for social entrepreneurs resulting from translational research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem to be solved</th>
<th>Recommendations to the problem owner and social entrepreneurs</th>
<th>Perspectives</th>
<th>Meta recommendation</th>
<th>Perspectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| How should (nascent) social entrepreneurs ensure that their solutions adequately address the effects of a humanitarian crisis? | - Prioritize analysis over hasty action.  
  - Utilize established tools and instruments to validate problems resulting from the humanitarian crisis.  
  - Utilize established tools and instruments to avoid fixation and allow flexibility to answer the humanitarian crisis. | 1 and 2      | - Understand that the purpose of social entrepreneurship as an answer to a humanitarian crisis is not only to establish concrete solutions. Creating and maintaining hope is an overriding result of any social entrepreneurial activity. | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 |
| How should social entrepreneurs scale appropriately in light of the uncertainty accompanying humanitarian crises? | - Improve continuously; the first solution is only the starting point.  
  - Community is essential for successful social entrepreneurship  
  - Aiming to serve the community is a good starting point; beyond that, build community and utilize it for success.  
  - Recruiting and retaining volunteers is essential; social entrepreneurs accomplish this by addressing relevant problems.  
  - Scaling is not only a challenge; scaling is an opportunity to improve the solution. | 2            | 3 and 4                                                                             | 4            |

### Declarations of interest

None.

### Credit author statements


### Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

### References


