LEARNING FROM LEADERS IN A FAST-GROWING FIELD

Results of the first Dalberg
Survey of Social Enterprise

December 2011

Dalberg

contents

executive summary

Social enterprise is a rapidly expanding field, and most social enterprises are still growing towards maturity as well. As they strive to become sustainable businesses, their leaders' experiences can offer valuable guidance for their peers and for new entrants. The goal of this survey has been to collect some of that guidance and present it in a way that demonstrates its relevance to social entrepreneurs.

As a result, the sample for this survey is not necessarily representative of the field of social enterprise as a whole, but it does include many of the world's most promising and successful organizations. Their leaders were asked to identify the factors most pivotal to their success and the challenges that they continue to face. They also gave advice to budding entrepreneurs hoping to enter the field.

Among the most prominent success factors cited by respondents were the selection of their teams, clarity and discipline in executing their social missions, and

preparation for the launch of their enterprises. This last point was especially relevant to finances, an area where vast differences exist between for-profit, hybrid, and non-profit or not-for-profit social enterprises. In a related finding, enterprises that relied on grants or government contracts were much further from financial sustainability, in general, than those dependent on revenue from sales of products and services.

Indeed, financing has been an enduring challenge for a significant share of even the most successful social enterprises. Another challenge that drew a parallel with the success factors was maintaining a skilled and motivated team. Respondents also named the presentation of their results – making the case for their value proposition, both as businesses and as generators of social benefit – as a continuing challenge. In this area, the respondents emphasized the use of data rather than storytelling to convey their achievements, and many expressed interest in new tools for creating standardized measures of their impact.

In offering recommendations to future social entrepreneurs, the leaders surveyed frequently emphasized persistence and due diligence. They said several times that the road to success in this field was a difficult one, and finding a truly unique niche was an important first step. We hope that this survey will be a first step toward making that road a little bit easier.

introduction

Social enterprise, once a poorly understood cousin of charities and non-governmental organizations, has become a mainstream part of the business sector around the world. Its growth is a validation of two central principles: 1) that it is possible to do well by doing good, and 2) that financial sustainability is the key to maximizing the social benefit of an organization. In the past few years, the boom in social enterprises has led to cover stories in major magazines and new tax rules recognizing their special status. Yet most social enterprises are still striving for maturity, both financial and operational.

To help them on their way, this survey has collected both basic information and insights gained through experience from dozens of prominent social entrepreneurs. We placed particular emphasis on the factors underpinning their success and the challenges they currently faced, but we also encouraged them to proffer advice to social entrepreneurs entering the field for the first time. The questions were designed for brief and easy answers, but respondents were welcome to expand upon their answers and provide general commentary as well. A complete facsimile of the survey is available online at http://dalberg.com/news under "Recent Publications."

Our hope is that on the strength of this inaugural effort, this collaboration between Dalberg and the Harvard team will become an annual tradition. We believe that sharing knowledge, as the survey's respondents have done so generously, will be an essential factor in the continued and successful growth of social enterprise.
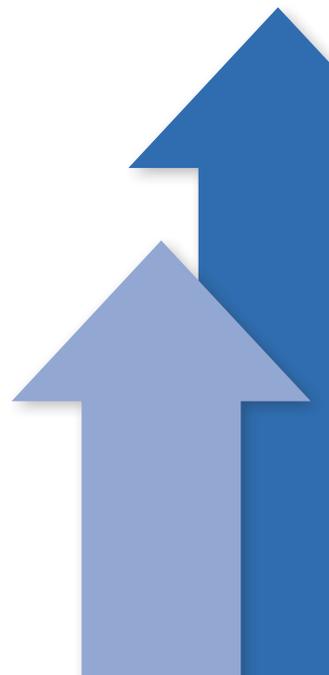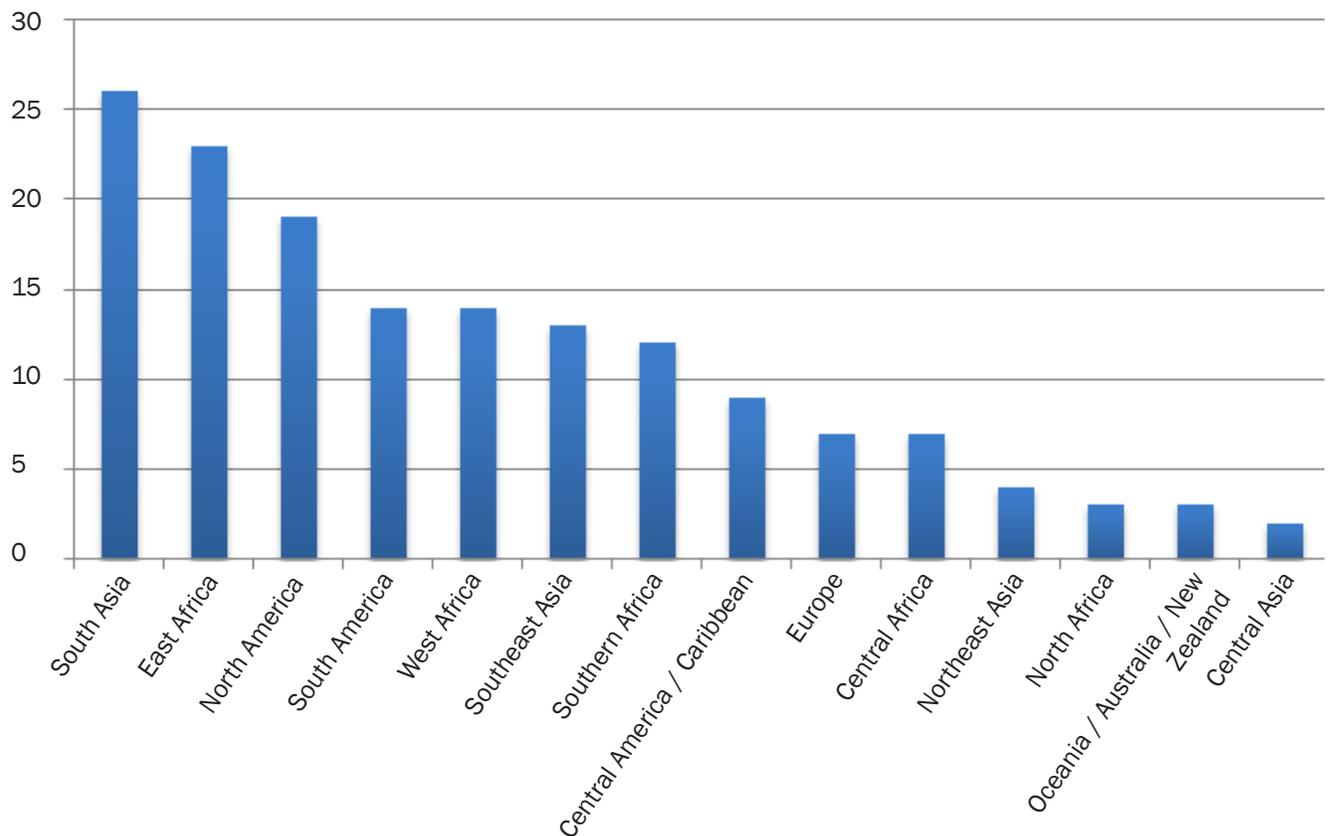
about the respondents and their enterprises

Potential respondents for the survey were selected from a combination of Dalberg's networks and solicited via Dalberg's online presence. Respondents included members of the Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs, Vodafone's World of Difference initiative, the Echoing Green fellows, participants in workshops of the Innovation Working Group of the Global Campaign for the Health Millennium Development Goals, and The Resolution Project. Some respondents requested participation in response to open calls issued via Twitter and on NextBillion.net.

The vast majority of the 65 respondents were the founders and/or leaders of the social enterprises they represented, which were a mix of non-profits,

FIGURE 1. Social enterprises operating in each region

for-profits, and hybrids (enterprises where non-profit entities and for-profit business lines are operationally linked). The respondents were distributed fairly equally in the structure of their organizations and their regions of operation.
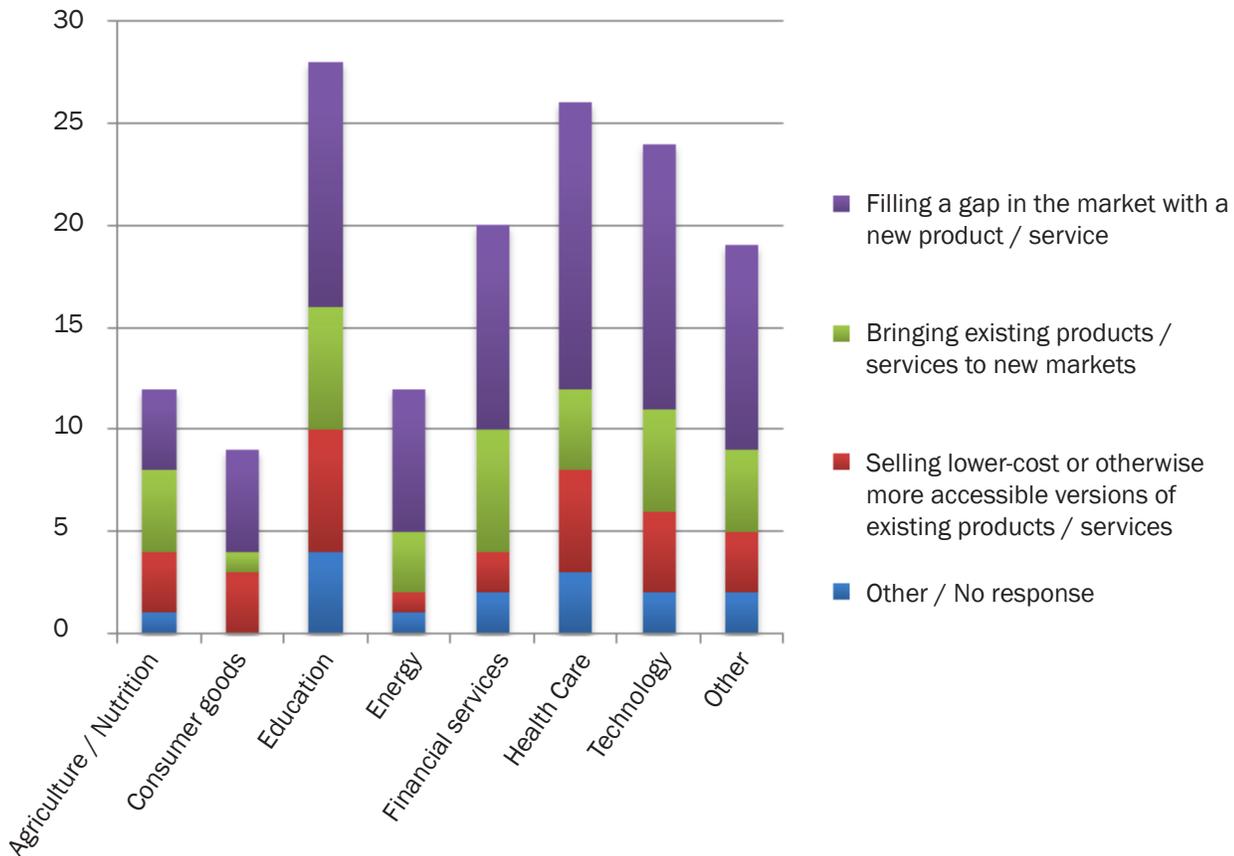
GEOGRAPHY

The respondents represented 22 for-profit enterprises, 29 non-profits, and 14 hybrids. Of these, 27 were operating in more than one region. The most common regions were South Asia and East Africa, though only 12 of the 26 enterprises operating in South Asia and 7 of the 23 enterprises operating in East Africa had their headquarters in those regions. The most common headquarters country was the United States, with 25 enterprises, which probably reflects some sampling bias due to the concentration of social enterprise networks and the use of English as the survey language.

" DON'T TRY TO START OR DESIGN SOMETHING EXCEPT WHERE YOU HOPE TO BE WORKING AND DELIVERING PRODUCT. AT THE POINT OF DESIGNING, PROTOTYPING, AND LAUNCHING A PRODUCT, IT CAN BE DONE BEST IN A LOCAL COMMUNITY OF THE KIND YOU INTEND TO WORK AND SCALE. AT THE POINT YOU'RE GROWING, YOU CAN LOOK AT HOW TO LOCATE OPERATIONS TO OPTIMIZE THEM AND CREATE A LONG-TERM SUSTAINABLE SETUP FOR YOU AND THE COMPANY."

— Nathan Wyeth, Frontline SMS:Credit

FIGURE 2. Industries and business models of social enterprises

Legend:
- Filling a gap in the market with a new product / service
- Bringing existing products / services to new markets
- Selling lower-cost or otherwise more accessible versions of existing products / services
- Other / No response

> DO YOUR RESEARCH AND IDENTIFY A USEFUL POINT OF ENTRY, HAVE A CLEAR SET OF BEGINNING GOALS, BE WILLING TO ADAPT TO THE NEEDS OF THOSE YOU SERVE, AND MAKE SURE YOU HAVE THE PASSION TO SUSTAIN THE COMMITMENTS OF YOURSELF AND YOUR STAFF."

— Nick Fiore, IT Empowerment

INDUSTRIES AND BUSINESS MODELS

Almost half of the respondents – 32 of 65 – said their enterprises operated in more than one industry or offered services bridging different industries. In almost all of these industries, roughly half of the respondents said their enterprises were filling a gap in the market by offering a new product or service. The exception was agriculture, in which roughly the same numbers of enterprises were bringing existing products or services to new markets or selling low-cost or otherwise more accessible versions of existing products and services.

"Other" industries named by one or two respondents were capital advisory and incubation, construction, consultancy, cross-sector partnerships, environmental sustainability, fair trade handmade crafts, housing, human rights, livelihoods, local

FIGURE 3. Stages of development and ages of social enterprises
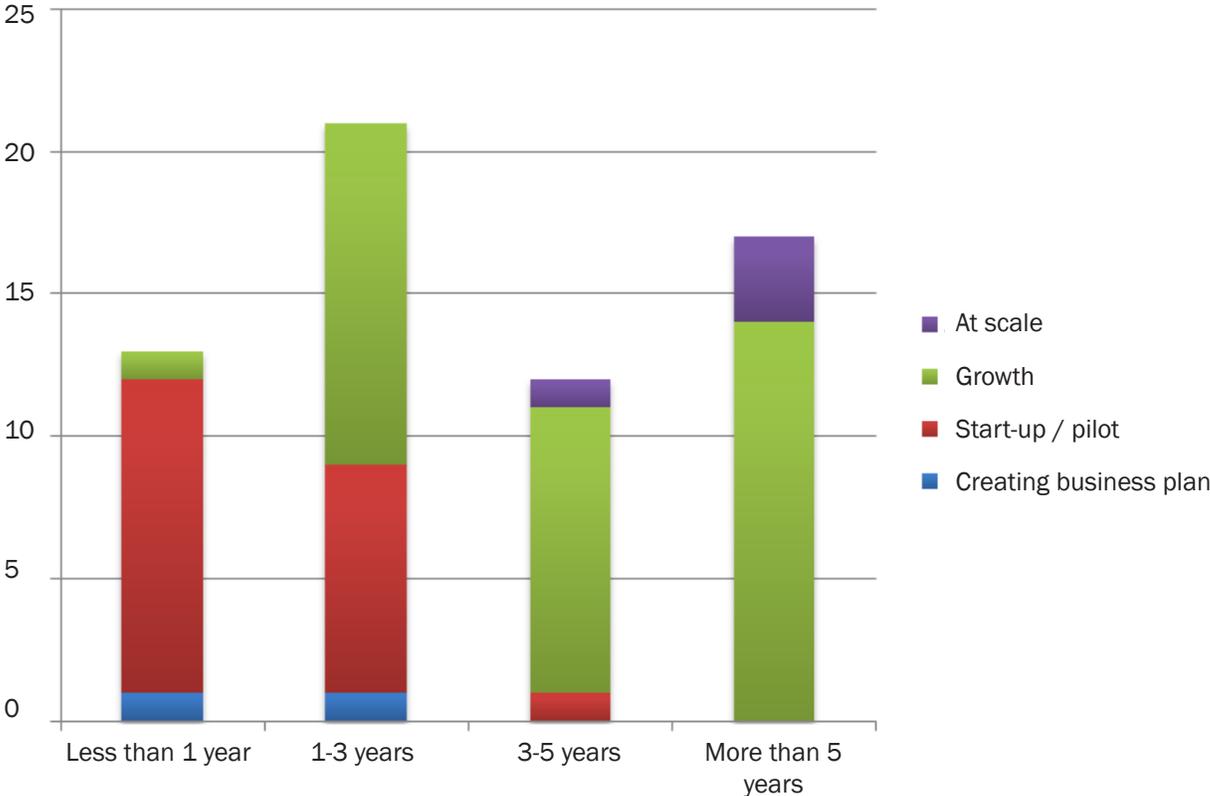
development, organization-building and expansion, media, public service/leadership development/local government, recycling, social impact investing, sustainable resource management, water and sanitation, women's rights, and other services.
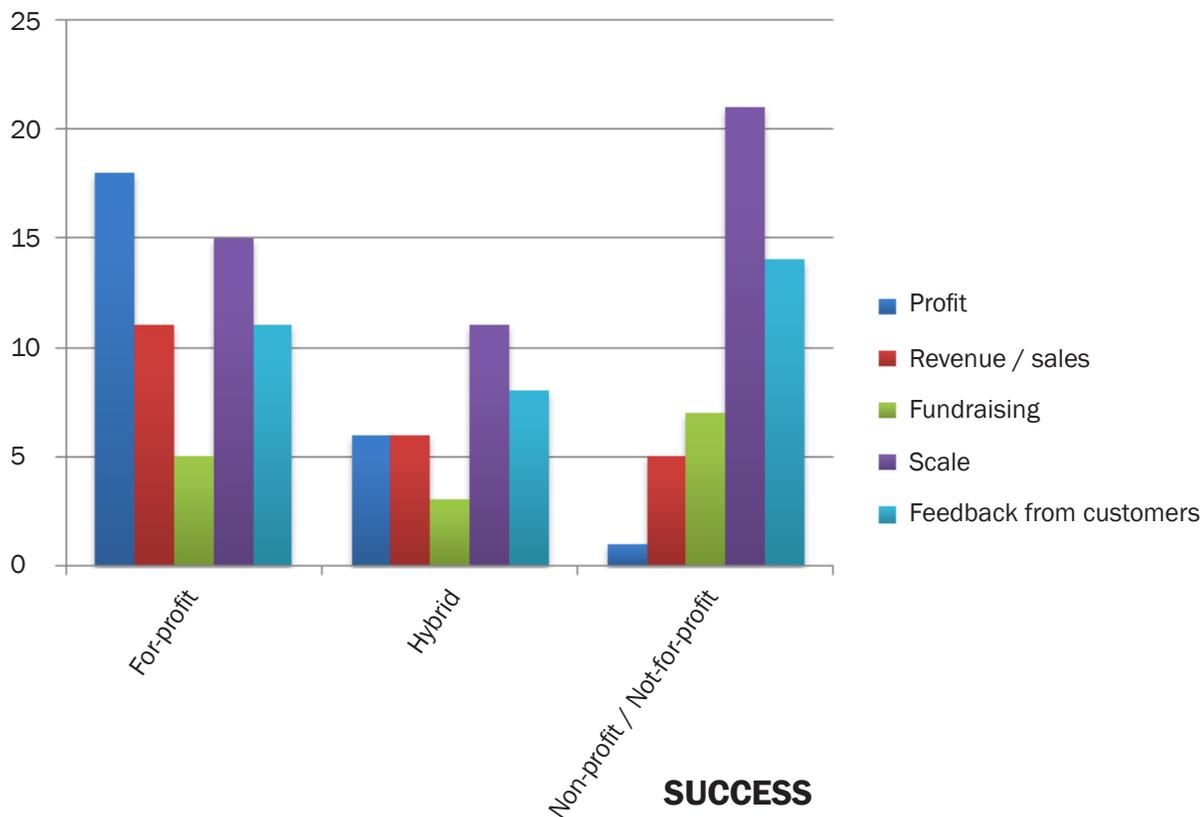
STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

More than half of the respondents said their enterprises, crossing all age ranges, were in the growth stage. Only one respondent reported an enterprise still in the start-up or pilot stage after more than three years in operation, suggesting that the endless pilots that prevail in some corners of the development community may not be such a problem among the leaders in social enterprise. Yet despite these leaders' success, as described in the next section, only four of them reported that their enterprises had attained their mature scale. All of these were at least three years old.

DON'T SPEND YOUR TIME TRYING TO GET IT PERFECT BEFORE YOU START. KIVA IS FAR FROM PERFECT, BUT WE GET BETTER AS WE GO AND CONSTANTLY TRY TO LEARN FROM OUR MISTAKES. LEARN TO FOCUS. WE NEED TO TAKE CUES FROM APPLE, FACEBOOK, AND OTHERS WHO KEEP THEIR HEADS DOWN AND EXECUTE."

— Premal Shah, Kiva

FIGURE 4. Measures of success by type of enterprise

Legend:
- Profit
- Revenue / sales
- Fundraising
- Scale
- Feedback from customers

> **"** BE SURE YOUR MAIN OUTCOME IS RELEVANT (I.E. IN HEALTH, HEALTH OUTCOMES ARE DEMONSTRATED TO IMPROVE), SUSTAINABILITY IN ITS OWN RIGHT IS NOT TRULY 'SOCIAL ENTERPRISE' IF NO SOCIAL BENEFIT CAN BE MEASURED. **"**
>
> — Richard Lester, WelTel

SUCCESS

Almost all of the respondents said their social enterprises were at least moderately successful. The only two enterprises reported as being rather unsuccessful were less than a year old, perhaps showing some patience or modesty on the part of those respondents. Measures of success were quite diverse, even among for-profit enterprises; four of these did not use profit to measure success, preferring revenue and/ or scale, and five used fundraising. Of the latter, four were in financial services and one in energy.

There was much variety in measures of social benefits, with 36 respondents adding details to the choices offered by the survey. Scale was a leading measure, particularly among non-profit enterprises; they were also most likely to use feedback from customers to gauge success. The distributions for forprofits and hybrids were strikingly similar, suggesting that the for-profit side of a hybrid may dominate in these evaluations.

success factors

What were the secrets of these social entrepreneurs' success? Their responses came through a combination of multiple-choice questions and longer comments. When asked to rank six success factors, the highest-scoring option was the implementing team, though opinions were far from unanimous. Connections and branding or marketing were the lowest-scoring options, except among for-profit enterprises, where they had similar importance to leadership, the implementing team, and knowledge of the customer base. (Scores were computed giving four points for each top ranking, two for each second-place ranking, and one for each third-place ranking.) Leaders of non-profits were especially unlikely to cite leadership and connections as crucial success factors.

FIGURE 5. Scores of success factors by type of social enterprise
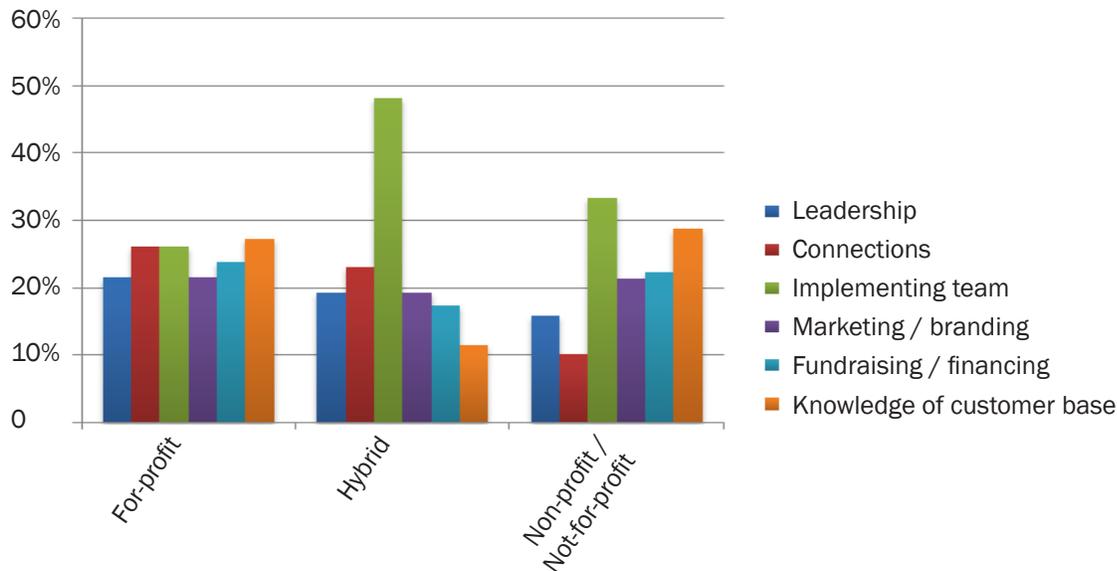
13

Taking the respondents' comments into account along with these scores provided a more nuanced picture of their success factors, however. For many, financing and staying true to their social missions were also very important.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TEAM

The determinants of success cited most often by respondents were the makeup of their teams and team dynamics. Leadership was also accorded importance by leaders of for-profit enterprises. Although the importance of team dynamics is often emphasized as an essential success factor in businesses without a social mission, the emphasis on team may be even more important in social enterprises for a variety of reasons.

First of all, good relations among team members may be especially important in keeping a team motivated, as other traditional forms of motivation such as job promotions or raises may not fit into the structure or budget of a social enterprise.

Whether a social enterprise or a regular company, an organization can bring together people of diverse talent and complementary skill sets in order to address its multifaceted needs. In the regular corporate world, these differences may at times cause tension or conflict but rarely interfere with companies' ability to function and grow. The need a unifying mission and good team dynamics is greater in social enterprises, perhaps because employees of social enterprises derive the majority of their satisfaction and motivation from working towards a supposed common goal rather than a monetary reward.

CLARITY AND DISCIPLINE

In their extended comments, several respondents cited the importance of staying true to their missions. They said that a clearly articulated goal and a coherent business plan, along with discipline driven by a fervent commitment to that goal, were essential for over-

FIGURE 6. Proximity to sustainability and changeability of business plans
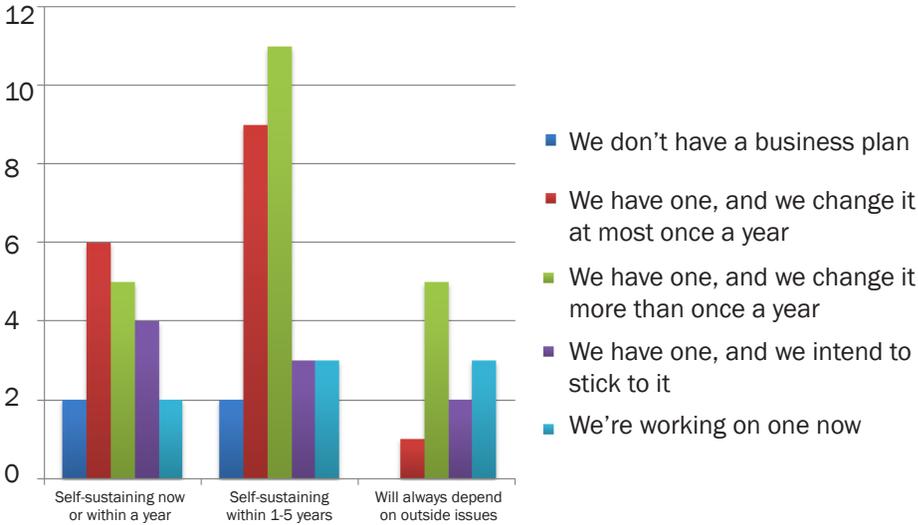
coming the inevitable challenges of building a social enterprise from scratch.

Some respondents also said that it was essential not to lose sight of the business plan while focusing on the social mission, and vice-versa. This success factor clearly separates social enterprises from regular companies, and it could be especially necessary in hybrid enterprises that explicitly divide their operations into not-for-profit and for-profit lines, both of which could pursue multiple objectives.

In spite of this emphasis on clarity, many respondents reported that their enterprises changed their business plans. This was true among sustainable enterprises as well as those yet to reach sustainability. Not surprisingly, the enterprises most likely to be in the process of preparing a business plan were those most dependent on outside funding for the foreseeable future.

PREPARATION

Respondents also emphasized the importance of doing research, due diligence, and fundraising before launching a social enterprise. Finding a niche in the market was

"STAY FOCUSED ON THE MISSION. NEVER FORGET THE REASON THE COMPANY WAS CREATED. THE PATH IS LONG AND THERE ARE NO SHORTCUTS IF YOU REALLY WANT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE."

— Daniel Izzo, Vox Capital

"DO A THOROUGH MARKET AND LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS, FIGURE OUT WHO OR WHAT IS FUNDING YOUR COMPETITORS AND WHY, WHAT YOUR UNIQUE VALUE OR VALUE-ADD IS, WHY WHAT YOU WANT TO DO ISN'T ALREADY BEING DONE, AND HOW TO AVOID OR OVERCOME THOSE REASONS."

— Bethany Rubin Henderson, City Hall Fellows

essential, and without one a would-be entrepreneur was better off joining an existing enterprise. Connecting with people in the community where a new enterprise was to operate could also help to ensure success, they said.

continuing challenges

Respondents overwhelmingly chose finances and maintaining a skilled and motivated team as the major challenges facing their enterprises. Among non-profit enterprises, staying focused on their missions was also an important challenge. That non-profits saw this as more of a challenge than for-profits or hybrids could show the extra importance they attach to their missions or, somewhat conversely, that they suffer from a problem of focus more than for-profits or hybrids. Given the success of these enterprises it seems unlikely that they are truly suffering from this problem, but a future survey might delve further into this question.

Other challenges cited included armed conflict in an enterprise's region, convincing policymakers to focus on social benefit through outcomes, and, for a social investment fund, finding promising businesses in low-income countries.

FIGURE 7. Challenges facing different types of social enterprises
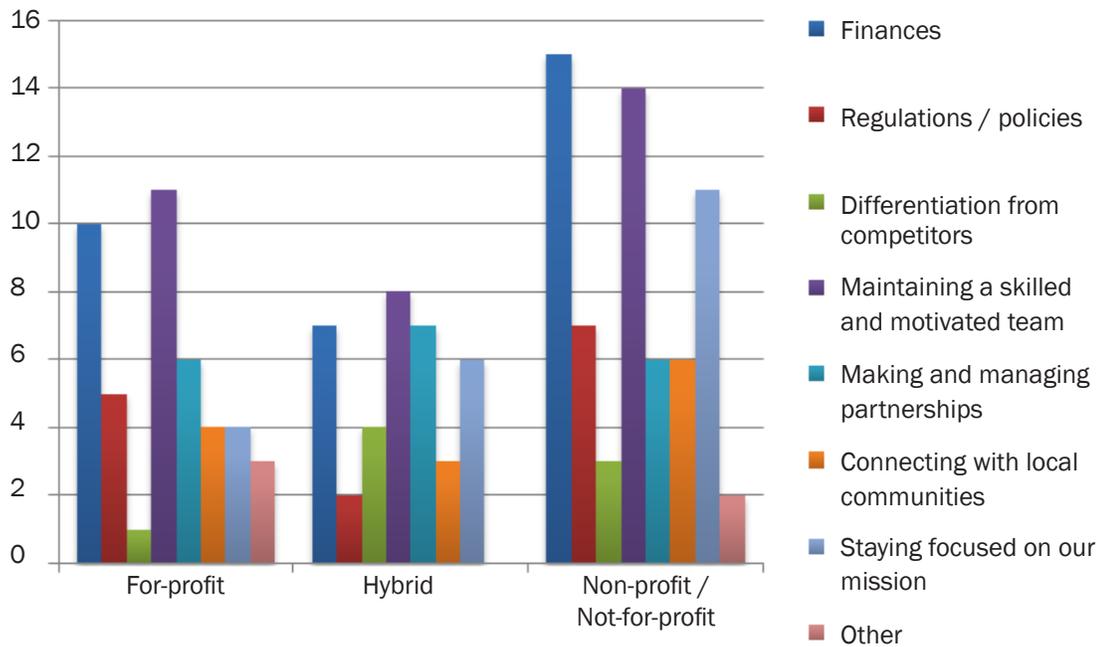
MAINTAINING A SKILLED AND MOTIVATED TEAM

Maintaining a motivated team, especially as an enterprise scales up, is one of the recurring challenges cited by respondents, with recruiting talent as another difficult task. Social enterprises may have more difficulty recruiting and motivating a team than regular companies because of lower average compensation. If employees know they could be offered more money and benefits elsewhere, there is a constant risk of losing the workforce during hard times or when a team loses its cohesion.

For-profit social enterprises may have less difficulty than hybrids and non-profits in motivating a team due to typically being able to offer more financial compensation as well as providing the "feel good" feeling associated with the social impact. But hybrids may see motivating a team as a bigger challenge than other forms of social enterprises due to the added complexities

> **RECRUIT A STRONG TEAM — IT'S THE TEAM THAT WILL MAKE YOUR IDEA A REALITY."**
>
> — Shaan Gandhi, Health2Home

and mixed mission of the hybrid model. With both a profit motivation and a social mission, team members may be divided between these two goals and may struggle with the unifying vision social entrepreneurs cite as being essential to success.

This difficulty in maintaining a motivated team is coupled with social enterprises' greater dependence on team dynamics. All enterprises, with or without a social mission, have employees with different and complementary skill sets, but having the same vision is especially important for social enterprises. Negotiating the heterogeneity in skill sets and backgrounds with the increased need for homogeneity in vision is a critical and enduring task.

FIGURE 8. Sources of operational financing for social enterprises
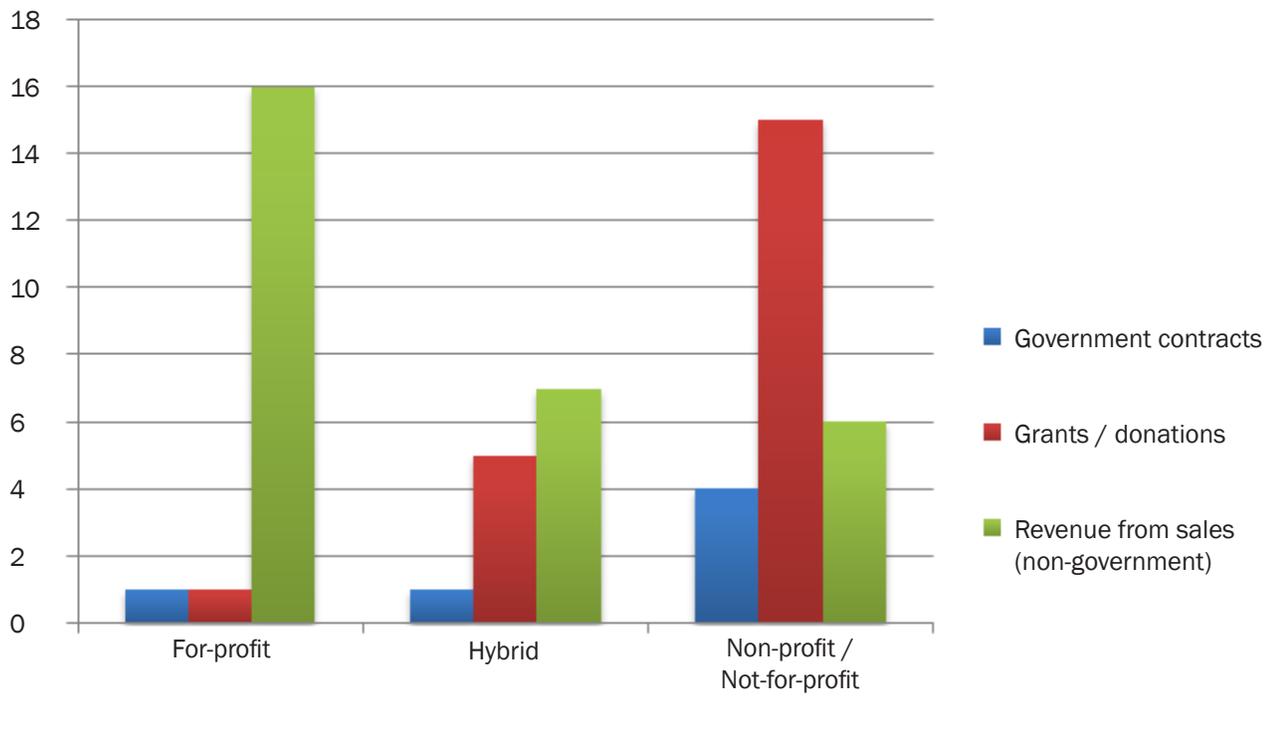
> **THERE IS STILL MUCH MORE TALK THAN ACTION IN TERMS OF INVESTMENT IN SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE ENTERPRISE, PARTICULARLY IN THE EMERGING MARKETS. SO WHILE IMPACT METRICS SHOULD BE FRONT AND CENTER IN DISCUSSIONS WITH IMPACT INVESTORS, YOU ARE UNLIKELY TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN RAISING CAPITAL IF YOU CANNOT MAKE A REASONABLE AND REALISTIC FINANCIAL CASE AS WELL."**

— Mildred Callear,
Small Enterprise Assistance Funds

FINANCING AND SUSTAINABILITY

As our respondents look into the future, one of the most prominent challenges they foresee is related to finances. Start-up financing is certainly a challenge for new entrepreneurs – many respondents said it was important to lock in financing for up to two years before launching a new enterprise – but for most of the respondents, financing to continue their operations was the relevant challenge.

Of the 32 respondents who cited finances as a challenge, five anticipated depending on government contracts for their operations and the rest were fairly evenly split between revenue from sales (non-government) and grants or donations. Among those that did not cite finances, none anticipated depending on government contracts. To judge by these responses, government contracts are not necessarily a reliable source of funding

FIGURE 9. Proximity to sustainability by source of operational finance
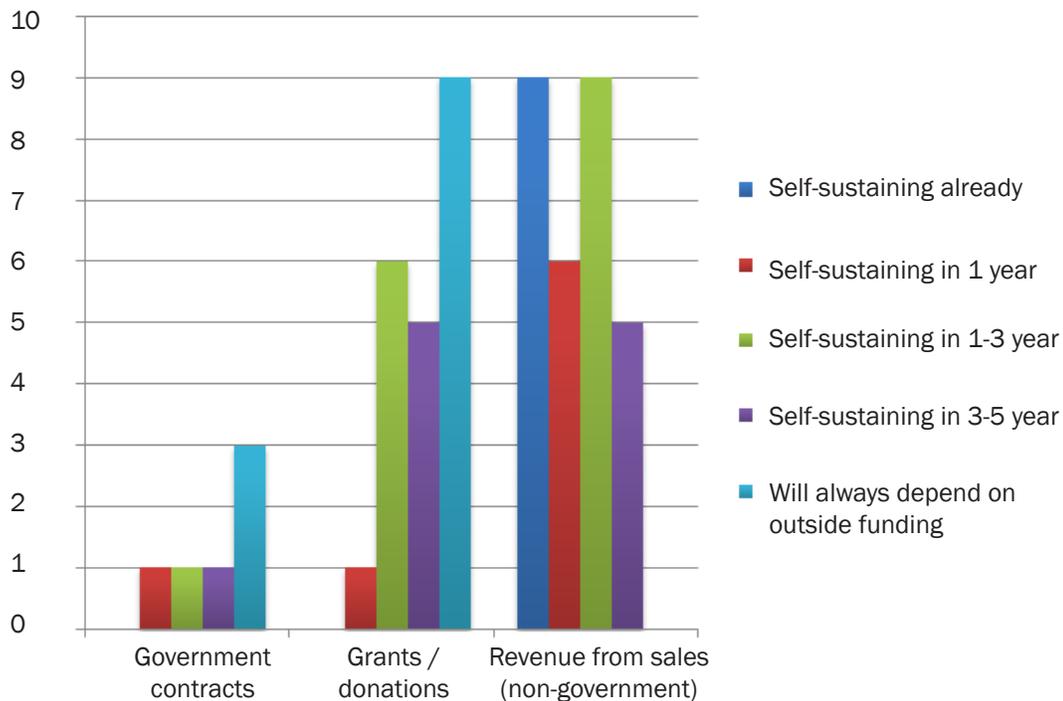
for social enterprises. Interestingly, only one for-profit enterprise and one hybrid were set up to serve government clients.
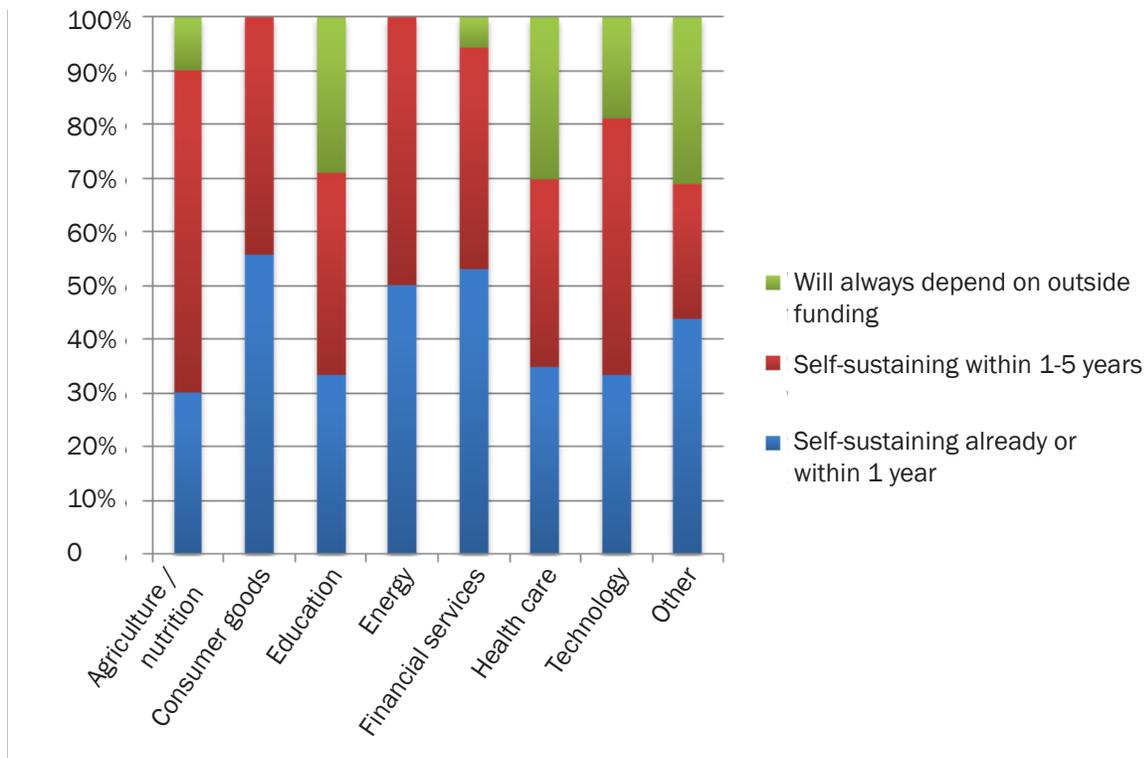
Because hybrid enterprises have both a non-profit and for-profit arm, they can both apply to foundations for funding and can make money from products and services. However, there may be other funding challenges that arise for hybrids because of their mixed mission, which can include issues with foundations not wanting to give to an organization that also has a for-profit arm or venture capitalists not wanting to invest because the organization aims to maximize social impact rather than profits.

Non-profits were by far the most likely to depend on grants and donations, though these may not offer the best path to sustainability. No enterprises that anticipated depending on government contracts or grants and donations were sustainable already, and only two expected to be within

18

> **BUILD A VALUE-BASED ORGANIZATION WHICH FOCUSES ON THE PURPOSE AND, AS A COROLLARY, THE 'NON-CUSTOMER.'"**
>
> — Thulasiraj Ravilla, Aravind Eye Care System

FIGURE 10. Proximity to sustainability by industry (shares of enterprises reporting operations)

Legend:
- Will always depend on outside funding
- Self-sustaining within 1-5 years
- Self-sustaining already or within 1 year

> MEDIA OR 'STREET CRED' AT SOCIAL BUSINESS CONFERENCES ARE NOT SUCCESS INDICATORS. FIGURE OUT THE PERFORMANCE METRICS YOU NEED TO FOCUS ON AND FORGET EVERYTHING ELSE FOR A FEW YEARS."
>
> — Anish Thakkar, Greenlight Planet

a year. By contrast, more than half of the enterprises dependent on revenue from sales were sustainable or expected to be within a year. One reason may be that enterprises dependent on sales fail more quickly, so that the ones that remain long enough to forge a reputation must be sustainable.

Proximity to financial sustainability differed markedly by industry as well. Respondents operating in education and health care were among the most likely to report that their social enterprises would always depend on outside funding. Those operating in consumer goods, financial services, and energy were the closest to sustainability. This difference may have to do with the nature of the industries; for instance, there is controversy around health care enterprises becoming for-profit because of the perception of commercialization of health care as immoral, unethical, or contradictory to the industry's purpose of serving people.

However, this may also have much to do with the enterprises' business models.

FIGURE 11. Use of data versus storytelling in presenting results by type of social enterprise
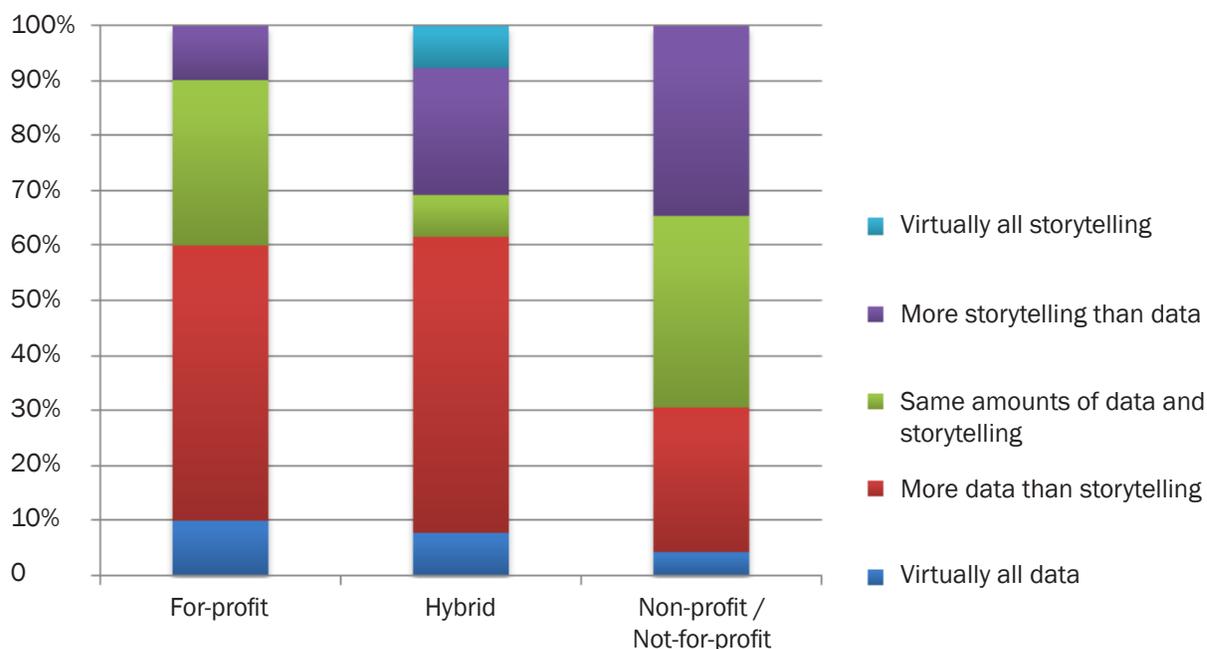
Educational enterprises, for example, may be producing public goods that merit subsidies from the community and thus might not need seek to become financially sustainable on their own. In this case, sustainability may not affect whether or not these organizations are successful, but it is something to keep in mind when considering how vulnerable the enterprises might be to shocks to outside funding.

MAKING THE CASE

For all social enterprises, seeking financing – be it from private markets, donors, or from potential clients – means making the case that their organizations deliver value. How they do this is especially important as the field becomes more crowded, traditional sources of funding are squeezed, and both regular and social investors get in the habit of examining value propositions more carefully.

The respondents said they looked to data and measurement when describing suc-

"USE A REPUTABLE ACCOUNTING OR AUDIT FIRM TO PROVIDE FINANCIAL AND POLICY GUIDANCE."

— Rachel Zedeck,
Backpack Farm Agriculture Program

FIGURE 12. Using tools designed for social enterprises to report data
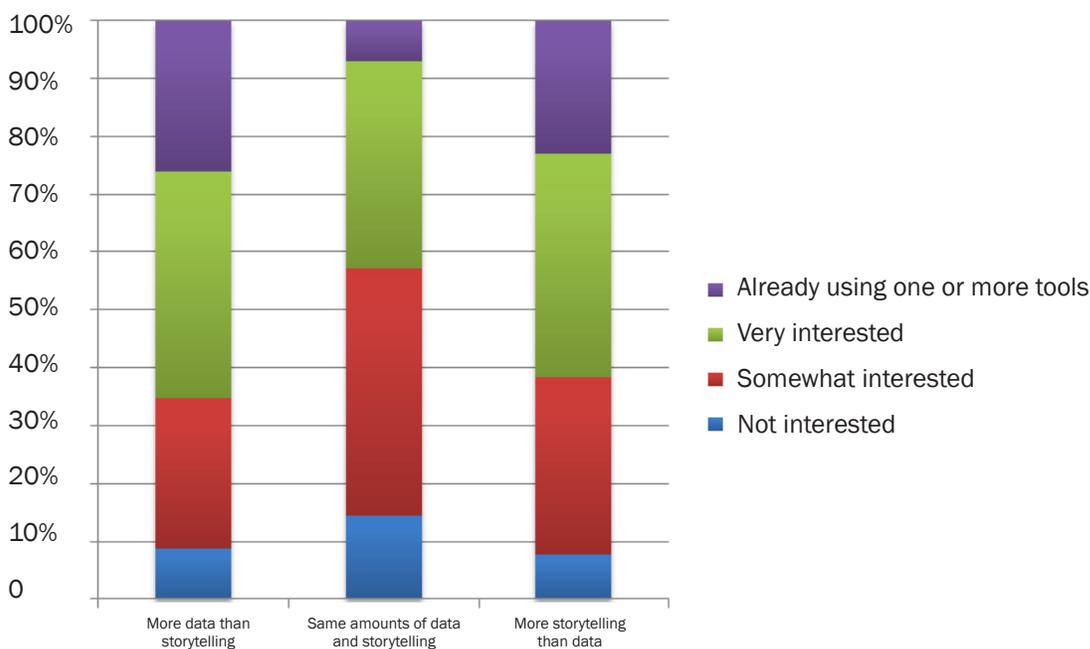
cess rather than simply appealing to the "emotions" of their donors. This is in part because their own metrics for success are fairly quantifiable. Indeed, almost three quarters (47 of 65) of the respondents said they used "scale" as a measure of success, and scale can be measured. The focus on scale may stem from the fact that most of them (37 of 63 respondents) were still in the "growth" stage. A similar number reported not being sustainable yet but anticipating financial sustainability within five years at most.

The balance between data and storytelling in presenting results differed across types of enterprises, however. Social enterprises might be expected to engage in more storytelling because of the more personal, emotional pull that could appeal to donors or social investors' emotions. And though the balance does tilt toward storytelling among non-profits more than among the other groups, leaders of all three use more data than storytelling when reporting results.

Leaders of for-profits are most likely to use more data than storytelling when presenting results. The reason may have to do with the audience that each type of organization is pitching. For-profits may be presenting more often to investors who want to look at hard data that provides evidence of the social enterprise as a potentially good investment. Hybrids are less likely to rely on data than for-profits; they may have a hard time in connecting both parts of their mission through data, and thus resort to more storytelling.

Social enterprises have a growing number of tools available to help them present their data in a clear and uniform way in accordance with industry-wide standards. Among these are the Impact Reporting and Investment Standards (IRIS), the Global Impact Investment Rating System (GIIRS), and Pulse. Only a small percentage of the respondents said they were using these tools at the time of the survey. Yet regardless of their preferred balances between data and storytelling, they expressed a strong interest in using the tools in the future.

recommendations for social entrepreneurs

A CLEAR BUT FLEXIBLE MISSION AND BUSINESS MODEL

Going forward, social enterprises should aim to be as clear and specific as possible with their vision and goals. Leaders of both businesses and social enterprises encounter instances in which they must negotiate between their missions or outside interests and their business models. The tension between the mission and what may be best for the enterprise is much greater and more complex for social enterprises. Leaders of social enterprises must be particularly careful not to stray too far away from their original mission when managing the interests and motives of donors and investors, as they risk alienating their teams and other backers.

"BE CLEAR ON YOUR MISSION AND GOALS, AND HAVE THE DISCIPLINE TO STAY THE COURSE. DO NOT BE TEMPTED BY DONORS WHO MAY HAVE OTHER PRIORITIES."

— Rosario Pérez, Pro Mujer

> *KEEP AN EYE ON THE DETAIL, BUT ALWAYS REMEMBER THE BIG PICTURE: THAT YOU'RE REALIZING A VISION; THAT THE VISION MEANS SOMETHING REALLY SPECIAL; AND THAT THE VISION IS WORTH THE BLOOD SWEAT TEARS AND TOIL YOU PUT IN TO IT!"*

— Rocco Falconer, Planting Promise

24

> "DON'T START A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE UNLESS IT'S A LAST RESORT. THERE ARE ALREADY SO MANY OTHER SOCIAL ENTERPRISES AND NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS THAT NEED COMPETENT AND PASSIONATE PEOPLE. JOIN THEM."

— Mark Hanis, United to End Genocide

However, while striving to adhere to its social mission, a social enterprise must also be realistic and maintain a measure of flexibility. If some flexibility in mission can help to bring in finances at a difficult time, then it could represent the difference between viability and shutting down. Developing a business plan that can be modified and reviewing the business plan regularly for updating can also help a social enterprise to adjust to circumstances. In addition, it is important not to become so focused on the details of the business plan that it hinders the development and actions of the social enterprise.

UNDERSTANDING THE MARKET

One of the greatest criticisms of social enterprises, especially in the context of the rapid increase in their number, is that there is too much overlap in the products and services provided by social enterprises. Ultimately, this may reduce their collective effectiveness in addressing an issue; they may be redundant and fail to fill a space in the market that has yet to be occupied. It is important for social entrepreneurs to familiarize themselves with the work already being done by other organizations so that they can understand which demands have yet to be met.

Part of this research should deal with the social and cultural context where an enterprise wants to provide products or services. Greater engagement of the people in the area that the enterprise is targeting can also help the social entrepreneur to under-

stand the market, ensuring that the enterprise's products or services will be in demand. Only 16 of 57 respondents reported that their enterprises interacted with local people in only one way; the rest all reported at least two types of engagement, including as employees, paid distributors, suppliers, and sounding boards for effects on their communities in addition to as consumers.

BUILDING UP SUPPORTERS

Beyond sources of finance, a social enterprise's backers include the people in its sphere – whether in its own team, its partnerships, or its wider community. The support of these people is a great help especially during hard times. These supporters usually have a connection to the mission of the organization that may be more durable than a financial interest.

PERSISTENCE

As a final recommendation, many of the social entrepreneurs mentioned persistence. As their responses have shown, social entrepreneurs face a unique set of challenges. But these leaders have remained quite positive about the general direction of the field. Of 60 respondents, 45 said the environment for social enterprise was becoming "somewhat more friendly" (30) or "a lot more friendly" (15). Nevertheless, the leaders recognized that social entrepreneurs would face a host of gut-checks on their way to success. Their advice was never to lose sight of the mission and the reason the enterprise was founded.

"MAKE PARTNERSHIPS EARLY, LISTEN TO GOOD ADVICE, USE VOLUNTEER ENERGY JUDICIOUSLY, AND DON'T LET THE BAD TIMES DISSUADE YOU — REMEMBER THAT THERE IS A WHOLE COMMUNITY OF SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS, AND WHILE ENTREPRENEURSHIP CAN BE LONELY, YOU ARE NOT, IN FACT, ALONE."

— Erin Little, Portapure

"DON'T STOP WORKING, BECAUSE IT IS HARDER TO START AGAIN. KEEP ON MOVING – KEEP ON LOOKING FOR WAYS TO MAKE YOUR PROJECT EXIST."

— Carlos García, Green Garbage