

## **Listening to the Voices of Social Entrepreneurs in Asia**

**By Dinh-Long Pham, a French-Vietnamese member of the ATD community in Thailand**

Aspiring to support people who want to make a difference, Dinh-Long joined a social start-up accelerator (Social start up accelerators provide services such as investment, training, product development support, peer-to-peer coaching and access to networking events that help social startups grow and and amplify their positive impact.) in Hong Kong, a collaborative space for changemakers in Hanoi, an organization promoting social engagement in Paris and, most recently, the United Nations Development Programme in Bangkok that supports young social entrepreneurs in Asia-Pacific. He can often be found at the ATD-Fourth World community space in Bangkok.

### **Different paths, same destination: the story of three young changemakers in Asia Pacific**

#### **Pamela – Crafting an ethical and sustainable fashion industry**

Pamela is the go-to person in Manila when it comes to vintage clothing, but she can't help hoarding them! One day, as she looked inside her closet, she realized she had more clothes than she could wear in her entire life! The epiphany was followed by a question: what could she do with all the clothes that she no longer wears? Her friends were also faced with the same dilemma because there was no widespread system to recycle clothes in the Philippines.

With no resolution in sight, Pamela decided that she would create the solution herself. After weeks of research and trials and errors, she not only perfected a way of transforming used clothes into shoes, but also discovered that many textile factories were accumulating unused fabric scraps and unsold garments. This is when she started her journey with *PHINIX*, with the purpose to give new life to all the fabric scraps and discarded clothes she would find on her way. Today, Pamela is 30 years old and still creates her own shoes and handbags from fabrics and second-hand clothes such as Japanese kimonos or shopping bags! As *PHINIX* grew, she started to employ differently abled people in her workshops and her dream, down the road, is to create the largest textile recycling centre in Southeast Asia.

#### **Joao – Building resilience**

Joao was born in Hatugau, a tiny village in Emera Municipality, Timor-Leste, very far from the life that I know. Every morning, he would walk 9 kilometres to go to school and every evening, he would walk back the same 9 kilometres and add another kilometre to fetch drinking water. With no electricity in his village, Joao was unable to study at night. While

visiting an aunt in the capital city of Dili, Joao realized that another world exists outside of his village and was determined to discover the possibilities and opportunities that this new world has to offer.

At 15, Joao sold his brother's chicken for US\$12, spent US\$5 to reach Dili, knocked on his aunt's door and enrolled in high school. From there, he found a side job, received his first scholarship to study at the National University of Dili, a second scholarship to complete an exchange program in Japan and then a third scholarship to study in the United States. After his studies, Joao decided to come back to Timor-Leste and was recruited by the United Nations Development Programme to support the youth of his country to find or create decent employment.

Today, Joao is 26 and shares his skills, adventures and knowledge with the next generation of East Timorese social entrepreneurs every day. Joao frequently returns to his hometown of Hatugau to help his community and encourage children and youth to broaden their horizons. Since returning to his hometown, Joao has coordinated the installation of a drinking water pump and solar panels, and he is now on a mission to provide English and ICT classes.

### **Ommer – The Hero's Journey**

Ommer was born with a book in his hands. At an early age, Ommer wrote his first manuscript and tried to get it published, a task that was almost impossible in his home country, Pakistan. While he was unsuccessful in getting his own work published, Ommer promised himself that one day, he would help other aspiring writers to succeed in this journey and to get their work published. In 2015, Ommer delivered on his childhood promise and launched *Dastaan*, an online platform which provides guidance and training to aspiring writers and publishes their work. At only 27, Ommer has helped over 7,000 Pakistani authors hone their craft, leading to the publication of 250 books, and allowing his vibrant community of readers to discover new Pakistani voices every day.

### **Changemakers combining profit with impact**

I meet more and more young people like Pamela, Joao and Ommer in Asia every day. These young changemakers are following their passions, creating innovative solutions to everyday problems, creating jobs in their communities and contributing to the wider development of their countries.

What unites these young people? They are leading change through social entrepreneurship. For people like Pamela and Ommer, they are creating businesses whose products or services aim to solve social or environmental problems. For these enterprises, profit is just

as important as impact. Indeed, generating profits allows the enterprise to be financially sustainable independently and therefore to guarantee a sustainable impact and profit makes the latter sustainable. For people like Joao, they are helping other social entrepreneurs to get on their feet, supporting them through the entrepreneurship journey and helping young people to amplify their impact.

The more I think about Pamela, Joao and Ommer, the more I admire what they have accomplished and continue to accomplish because they managed to break through the triple challenge of being a social entrepreneur, young, in Asia. Social entrepreneurs have to constantly find ways to strike a balance between their economic and social goals. Young people lack professional experience, networks and financial capital to start this journey. And to be a young social entrepreneur in Asia means throwing yourself into a very difficult entrepreneurship ecosystem where little support exists (it depends on the country, of course). It also means going against societal ideals around success and parental expectations.

This context doesn't encourage young people to dream about starting their own business, for sure. Quite the opposite actually, as entrepreneurship is often an obligation to make ends meet, rather than a choice, which is why young people are often (strongly) pushed to become engineers, lawyers or doctors (the list is well known) through societal, peer or family pressure. It's easy to understand why since their parents have sacrificed their whole lives so that their children could access education, higher salaries and stable positions.

So, why is social entrepreneurship important? In a region where young people are massively unemployed, underemployed or working in unacceptable conditions, where they face social exclusion, a lack of opportunities or skills and are more likely to suffer from the negative impact of shocks such as COVID-19 or climate change, encouraging entrepreneurship and building a genuine support system for entrepreneurs seem to be a logical solution for young people to create jobs for themselves and for their communities. Encouraging entrepreneurship also means unlocking the potential, resilience and creativity of these passionate youth who want to build a better world!

### **Cultivating social entrepreneurship among youth**

How can we cultivate social entrepreneurship among youth? In my opinion, this challenge can be broken down into four key areas:

- 1. How can (social) entrepreneurship become attractive and exciting enough for young people (and their parents) to consider it as a viable career choice?*

For example in France, entrepreneurship has become increasingly trendy and widespread over the last decade and I am convinced that personalities like Xavier Niel (Free), Frédéric

Mazzella (BlaBlaCar) or, more recently, social entrepreneurs like François-Ghislain Morillion and Sébastien Kopp (Veja) have helped make this path fashionable by enabling the general public to put faces, stories and inspiring journeys to the word “entrepreneurship”. With Veja, the general public can discover this hybrid model and understand the role and impact that social entrepreneurs might have.

In the Asian context, it would be pioneers like Professor Muhammad Yunus (Grameen Bank, Bangladesh), Dr. Govindappa Venkataswamy (Aravind Eye Hospitals, India), Jimmy Phan (KOTO, Vietnam), Xu Yong Guang (Narada Foundation, China) or Rithy Thul (KOOMPI, Cambodia) who embody the concept of “social entrepreneurship” in their countries.

It’s important to demystify social entrepreneurship, to make it an accessible and realistic career choice. That means exposing these pioneers as much as possible to both specialized audiences and, above all, the general public! This also means creating an entrepreneurial culture where role models and pioneers are clearly identified, where failure is accepted and even valued, and where young people think: “I can do that too!” Listening to other social entrepreneurs, meeting them, and understanding them can be a powerful impetus for young people!

## *2. How to effectively support youth in their entrepreneurship journey?*

How do we minimize the risks that young people are taking and how do we maximize the survival rate of the social enterprises that they create? This is what Joao is doing every day in Dili! The three answers to this question are interconnected: through education, opportunities and regulations. In other words, entrepreneurship ecosystems have to be developed sufficiently so that young people:

- Are well prepared for the adventure and challenges of entrepreneurship, whether they learn it at school, at university, through lifelong learning or by themselves;
- Are well supported and mentored through opportunities that are diverse and available: financial capital, expertise, support programs, events and spaces for different stakeholders to mingle (the ATD House in Bangkok is one such place!), etc.;
- Can operate in an enabling regulatory and policy environment where legal status is given to social enterprises, where there is less red tape and where governments can create youth-friendly policies.

## *3. How do we “leave no one behind”?*

This is a big challenge whether you are in Paris, Hanoi, Phnom Penh or Hong Kong: entrepreneurship, by choice, remains a luxury. It remains a path mainly undertaken or considered by people with a similar profile: they have completed higher education, they live

in a big city, they have international exposure. It's important that youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, rural areas, and vulnerable or marginalized communities also benefit from the development of an entrepreneurship ecosystem. With the right conditions and support, they are as resilient, creative and passionate as anyone else. It's easier said than done, but recognizing this disparity is a first step towards equalizing access to entrepreneurship. The second step is to intentionally include these young people in these circles and discussions and to speak their language. Finally, they need to be given power and have their voices genuinely heard because, otherwise, it's just tokenism.

4. *And what about those who don't want to become an entrepreneur?*

Finally, I'm conscious that not every young person wants to become an entrepreneur—those who do are a minority. But I'm also conscious that most young people want to have a positive impact on society or the environment—that is the nature of our generation. However, this can only happen if young people are provided with the right opportunities and support to take action aligned with their aspirations and unique situation. While some will become social entrepreneurs, others will choose to volunteer or take to the streets and demonstrate; yet others will transform their businesses from the inside or transform their lifestyle—there are so many ways to take action! You just need to know what the options are.

**Listen to the voice of social entrepreneurs but, above all, listen to your inner voice**

Social entrepreneurship is not the only way through which young people can create a better world. From my experience, however, it's often a path that makes you happy and proud, and that is aligned with your values. It can also give you the strength to believe in your own definition of success and to drown out the external voices that would discourage you from doing what you feel called to do. In the end, this is what really matters. What is our inner voice telling us?

We are a generation searching for meaning. Over time, it has become the new normal to have a positive impact and everyone should have the means to do so, as best as they can, and any way they feel like! For people like Pamela, Joao and Ommer, I know that they are already on the right track!