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Gearing Up for the 2007 Social Enterprise Conference

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Posted: 2/26/07

"Social entrepreneur" is a much bandied about term that few seem to be able to define. On Sunday, March 4th, the Social Enterprise Conference will bring together 1,000 students and practitioners to explore this increasingly expansive field.

One thing that social entrepreneurs have in common, whether working in small nonprofits or large global corporations, in start-ups or long-established institutions, is a commitment to implementing creative ideas for solving social problems on a local, national or even global scale.

The SEC brings together the most eclectic mix of speakers seen on the Harvard Business School Campus all year. VPs and COOs from companies including Merck and Goldman Sachs' Urban Investment Group will be speaking alongside founders and top executives of leading edge organizations like Oxfam, Acumen Fund, Brigham Women's Hospital, FilmAid, and Bono's (Product) Red campaign.

Harvard's Social Enterprise Conference is one of the largest and most respected conferences in a field that is generating more and more excitement. As Gordon Bloom, a Kennedy School Professor and conference moderator explains "the social sector is becoming more innovative, entrepreneurial and competitive, and this is powering a massive wave of social entrepreneurship initiatives, interest, and opportunities. In the last 25 years there has been a huge shift in the outlook of business schools and public policy schools on university campuses such as Harvard, Stanford, Oxford, Columbia, Yale, NYU, Duke...and SECON is annually one of the best student organized venues to see that extraordinary shift."

Though this year's conference panels will cover a broad swath of topics including urban development, social venture capital, responding to global health challenges and using the arts for social change, two particularly hot button topics in the social enterprise community will be a focal point: corporate social responsibility and microfinance.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) practitioners believe that companies can create social value in addition to profits. However, critics have voiced skepticism about the effectiveness and appropriateness of CSR, arguing that corporations, though they may have legal obligations that have ethical dimensions, only have obligations to their shareholders. As blue chip companies like Nike, Unilever, Yahoo and Nordstrom add CSR specialists to their staffs, understanding CSR, its limitations as well as the competitive advantages that it can provide, are critical. The conference will feature a high-profile debate between Mark Kramer, founder of Foundation Strategy Group, and Clive Crook, a writer for *The Economist* to explore these issues.

When Muhammad Yunus, founder of Bangladesh's Grameen Bank, won a Nobel Peace Prize in 2006, it brought an international spotlight to the burgeoning microfinance industry. The Grameen Bank has provided small loans to 6.7 million people in Bangladesh, some of whom had never touched money before. Small scale loans, sometimes as small as a few dollars, have had a tremendous impact on poor borrowers and their

surrounding communities. The World Bank found that microfinance accounted for 40% of the poverty reduction amongst moderately poor populations in rural Bangladesh.

The field has generated so much interest as of late that two panels, including microfinance practitioners from around the globe, will be devoted to exploring it at the conference. Key questions that will be addressed include: What should the role of profit be in microfinance? How can microfinance effectively gain global scale while still providing healthy returns and high quality service? Where are the areas for innovation within both for-profit and nonprofit models in the field?

For those who are just learning about the field of social entrepreneurship and are interested in getting a better understanding of the many possible paths within this broad field, the conference will provide dozens of remarkable role models.

Many of the most interesting and successful social entrepreneurs have had lives with many acts and careers that transition fluently between the public and private sectors. For instance, afternoon keynote speaker Daniel Doctoroff, Deputy Mayor for Economic Development and Rebuilding for the City of New York, has helped lead New York to its strongest economic position in decades. In 2005, the city achieved record levels of jobs, visitors, population, and the greatest number of housing starts since the 1960's. But before joining the Bloomberg administration, Mr. Doctoroff was a managing partner at Oak Hill Capital, one of the oldest and most respected private equity firms. Additionally, morning keynote speaker Cheryl Dorsey is now President of Echoing Green, a social venture fund that has awarded almost \$25 million in start-up capital to over 400 social entrepreneurs worldwide. Prior to Echoing Green, Ms. Dorsey earned her MD from Harvard Medical School and has worked everywhere from the White House to a mobile community health van in the poorest neighborhoods of Boston.

This year's conference theme is "engage"-the goal is not just to inspire attendees to dream of change but to develop the strategies to make that change a reality. Thomas Edison once said, "If we all did the things we are capable of doing, we would literally astound ourselves." Hopefully, this year's Social Enterprise Conference will remind us to do just that.

Tickets for the conference are still available. Visit www.socialenterpriseclub.com/conference/ or come by the Social Enterprise Conference table in Spangler Grille to register.

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