# New narratives of development work? Making sense of social entrepreneurs' development narratives across time and economies

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A B S T R A C T

This article views social entrepreneurship as a relatively new model for achieving sustainable development. It also identifies development narratives that social entrepreneurs (SEs) construct to represent and promote their work as an important research gap in development studies. Drawing on the development and narratology literature, and employing computational linguistics (CL) techniques, this article compares the development narratives of 1076 Ashoka SEs across two periods (2009–2013 and 1994–1998) and two economies (developing and developed). CL analyses reveal important themes that characterize the identity, framing and orientations of development SEs across time and economies. The findings demonstrate how SE development narratives i) tend to be more pragmatic and solution-centric, and contain less political ideology than conventional development narratives, ii) combine extant development ideas and models but reframe them in new ways to address contemporary, complex development challenges, and iii) reflect a 'bottom-up' approach that encourages local ownership and collaborations with various social and economic sectors to achieve development goals. Overall, this study identifies the increasing importance of SEs in the development industry and reveals new aspects of SEs—their latent political framing, collective-utilitarian identities, and topical areas—that require further research via development narratives.

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## 1. Introduction

Scholars, policy makers, and practitioners in the development industry are constantly looking for new models, approaches and tools to address development challenges. In recent years, a number of development scholars began to explore the promise of social entrepreneurship as an innovative and sustainable model of development, particularly to address poverty and inequality problems (Cieslik, 2016; Galvin & Iannotti, 2015; Venot, 2016). Development scholars have framed social entrepreneurship as a 'morally legitimate' alternative development model (Dart, 2004; Venot, 2016) and the transfer of capitalistic tools to the development field (Galvin & Iannotti, 2015), through 'deep participation' of local community members (Cieslik, 2016; Willis, 2005). These frames position social entrepreneurship as a relatively new model or thinking in development industry that enriches existing development models such as foreign direct investment (FDI), public-private partnership (PPP), and the more traditional foreign aid and loans.

Development thinking is influenced by various paradigms and approaches at different eras of development (Koehler, 2015;

Pieterse, 2001). Despite the increasing importance of social entrepreneurship in development studies, we know very little about social entrepreneurs' (SEs) development work, and more specifically, about the narratives that they employ to represent and promote their work, better known as *development narratives* (Büscher, 2014; Roe, 1991, 1995). Social entrepreneurship is different from conventional development models such as politically motivated foreign aid programs and development loans, and top-down rural development programs. Therefore, its narratives may differ from conventional development narratives. As more SEs have entered the development sector (Cieslik, 2016; Galvin & Iannotti, 2015), and as SEs practices have evolved worldwide, various SEs narratives have been constructed thus providing opportunities to study them and the thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, goals and planned actions of social entrepreneurs. SEs development narratives provide insights into how social entrepreneurs construct social reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). If these narratives are examined longitudinally and across economies, they can shed light on what social entrepreneurs pay attention to (Pennebaker, Mehl, & Niederhoffer, 2003; Ocasio, 1997) and the what, why and how they approach development work relative to conventional development work and narratives. Consequentially, this paper asks an important research question: *How have*

*social entrepreneurs' development narratives changed across time and economies?*

To answer the question, this study employed narratology—the study of narratives using textual data to understand how individuals or organizations think and act to achieve goals—(Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001; Parkinson & Howorth, 2008; Sewell, 2010) and computational linguistics (CL) (Baker, 2012; Rayson, 2008) to study Ashoka-supported social entrepreneurs (hereafter *Fellows*) and their SEs. Ashoka, headquartered in Washington, DC, is one of the world's most influential SEs support organizations. Although Ashoka does not label itself as a 'development organization', the thousands of social entrepreneurs (Ashoka Fellows) in more than 70 countries that it supports essentially engage in development work in various fields (e.g., poverty, education, healthcare). This study focused on 1076 narrative profiles of Ashoka Fellows from two periods (2009–2013 and 1994–1998) and two economies (developing and developed). To analyze the narrative data, the study employed five computational linguistics analyses (i.e., keyness, semantic category, collocation, complex n-gram, and keyword-in-context). The findings showed that two general themes cut across time and economies: i) the "compelling story" format, and ii) a neutral- to soft-sell style. Additionally the analysis identified five themes that differed across time and economies: i) 'citizen organization' identity, which reflects the SE's community/-collective focus (observed only across time), ii) a hybrid frame that combines business and impact evaluation but not a non-profit frame, as a central feature of SEs, iii) technology or solution-centric thinking, vi) stakeholder orientation, which reflects external entities that SEs work with (e.g., local government officials, corporations, local community members), and vii) the rise of topical areas such as healthcare, agriculture and the environment (for the later period only) as well as rights, government and social inclusion (for developing economies only). These findings suggest that Ashoka SEs development narratives:

- are less political and more pragmatic, community focused, and steeped in technical language than conventional development narratives;
- incorporate current development ideas, theories and models but are reframed to address contemporary, complex development challenges; and
- show that SEs employ a bottom-up approach by encouraging local ownership of problems and solutions and collaborations with other government, NGOs and profit-making organizations to achieve their goals.

Overall, this study makes important contribution to three aspects of development SEs: the *frames* (e.g., neutral to soft-sell and diagnose-then-strategize, apolitical, and hybrid logic), the *identities* (e.g., grassroots/community, utilitarian, and stakeholder) and *topical areas* (e.g., agriculture, healthcare, and environment) that SEs focus on in representing their work. The study highlights opportunities to examine the (indirect or latent) political dimensions of SE work—one of the most understudied aspects of social entrepreneurship—as well as to further advance development linguistics as a new, legitimate domain of development research.

## 2. Development, social entrepreneurship, and SEs narratives

### 2.1. Development thinking and narratives

Development studies have historically explored poverty and inequality and multidisciplinary issues in 'developing' countries and those with a colonial history (Currie-Alder, 2016; Pieterse, 2001). Development narratives are important to development studies because they provide insight into how development actors think, along with their goals, attitudes, perspectives and processes. Development narratives focus on the process (means) and outcomes (ends) of development initiatives (Enns, Bersaglio, & Kepe, 2014; Najafizada & Cohen, 2017) and their linguistic aspects (e.g., key words or phrases) reflect the social entrepreneurs' attitudes, perspectives, assumptions and goals. Traditional development narratives are rarely politically neutral and generally capture the political and marketing aspects of development work to enhance their moral legitimacy and gain stakeholder financial and political support (Büscher, 2014; Roe, 1991, 1995; Venot, 2016).

To understand development narratives, particularly in social entrepreneurship, we must understand how development thinking has changed over time. Thus, this article maps development thinking from its start in the 1950s along with its major paradigms, approaches and narratives (Table 1). Table 1 shows various types of development narratives based on important keywords and phrases in each decade along with the historical contexts, development paradigms and approaches. In the 1950s, following modernization efforts in the post-war economies and state-led development programs, development narratives revolved around words and phrases such as "modernization", "decolonization", "the inferiority of the Global South", and "government intervention". In the 1960s, development narratives shifted towards "aid as a means to eliminate poverty" and "small farms" as dependency thinking gained prominence. The narratives shifted again in the 1970s to focus on the "empowerment of women" as part of the rising awareness of women's oppression globally; they changed again in the 1980s reflected by "reform", "deregulation", "privatization", "market" and "public private partnership" as keywords, as neoliberalism took center stage. The narratives shifted to "sustainable development", "employment" and "microcredit" as part of the rise of the sustainability movement (1990s). After the turn of the century, the narratives grew richer and more inclusive involving "people, planet, prosperity and partnership", "private sector", "corporate social responsibility (CSR) and philanthropy", "social inclusion", "anti-discrimination", "civil society", "participation and empowerment", and "non-ideological cooperation" as an enhancement of prior sustainability thinking (2000s). The persistence of sustainability thinking in the1990s and 2000s may reflect a growing consciousness about the long-term survival of life on Earth, and the interrelatedness of global problems, which require global cooperation to solve.

Development narratives have employed at least four frames since the 1950s. A common type of narrative is one that emphasizes the *benefits* of development work (i.e., *benefit/success framing*). Examples of narratives with benefit/success framing include "bringing development to the people", "utilizing idle lands", and "creating employment" (Andersen et al., 2016, p. 364), which were used by a local Malaysian government to handle complex political relations with communities in large-scale palm-oil projects. Büscher (2014) argued that "selling success" (p. 79) in conservation and development in South Africa was critical to get buy-in from donors and policy makers. Büscher (2014) identified a successful approach to such buy-in—engaging a local community of experts to influence community members by spreading the cause-and-effect relationships and benefits of a development project (called *epistemic circulation*). These examples highlight the importance of political marketing in development narratives and their use (and possibly abuse) by parties with vested interests.

In some instances, organizations promoting development projects exaggerate their potential benefits along with the outcomes of similar projects. Communities in both developed and developing economies have come to mistrust large organizations like the UN and the World Bank that promote such projects. This leads to the second type of development narrative that focuses on *revealing the truth* (i.e., *revelatory framing*) of development claims through