

Asia Centre: Social Innovation in Action

James Gomez

Abstract

In an environment where development aid and grant based funding models are changing, social initiatives are struggling to find resources to sustain their work. Presently, alternative options open to social initiatives include the social enterprise and social business models, but these have their own challenges. Asia Centre is a not-for-profit regional research and training centre based in Bangkok, Thailand. It employs social innovation and uses a mixed financial model to resource its activities. Founded in July 2015, Asia Centre began its start-up operations through an initial endowment to secure its premises, fittings and equipment, and a two-year operational fund. Thereafter, the Centre finances its programmes through a mix of revenue generating and fundraising activities. These include income generated by providing meeting room services, running training programs, undertaking paid consultancies and implementing some grant funded projects. In this way, Asia Centre is able to support its work with its partners in a sustainable manner. This presentation on the Asia Centre is a case study on social innovation. It provides some practical insights into the changing world of social initiatives and the challenges of funding sustainable activities.

Key words: Asia Centre, Development Aid, Grants, Philanthropy, Social Innovation

1. Introduction

The Asia Centre is a not-for-profit social initiative. It was incorporated in July 2015 in Bangkok, Thailand as an independent, non-partisan legal entity. The Centre operates as a regional not-for-profit research and training initiative through which academics and experts come together to provide professional services in the rapidly changing development and education sectors.

Primarily, the Centre caters to the demand for academic experts to provide professional services for clients in the Southeast and Asia-Pacific region. Core competencies of the Centre include education, research, policy advice, training and professional development in the Asia-Pacific region, acquired over twenty years of practical experience. The Centre's experts boast substantive fieldwork and institutional experience and possess a sound understanding of the economic, political and social conditions in Asia.

Asia Centre has exclusive use of a 120sqm office and meeting space in central Bangkok. It is well located at major airport and city transport intersection and close to restaurants and hotels. The use of its facilities and professional services are for clients in Thailand, Southeast Asia, the wider Asia-Pacific region and beyond. Its facilities and services support academic & professional development; media & communications; research and publications; and development assistance and the nonprofit sector. Its clients are educational institutions, research institutes,

nongovernmental organizations, governmental institutions, intergovernmental organizations, business and others engaged in improving their respective communities.

Asia services are cost effective, of high quality and tailored to our clients' needs. The Centre takes pride in timely delivery and good alignment with its clients' requirements.

2. Rationale

The unprecedented pace of globalization over the past century has produced rapid social change at all levels and in all parts of the world. All organizations, whether educational, governmental or nongovernmental, need to augment their intellectual and organizational capacities in this changing social context.

In the not-for-profit sector, intergovernmental organizations, national agencies and non-governmental organizations are struggling to provide quality support in the face of dwindling budget (FASID, 2005). As such the not-for-profit sector requires cost-effective support for capacity development, customized training, research and professional development services, expert advice in specialised knowledge areas, project implementation and monitoring and evaluation, and training facilities. Development agencies are also moving from providing aid to advising on international and national development policy (McCloskey, 2012). As such are increasingly soliciting expert advice from outside their organizations and are outsourcing the delivery and implementation as well as the monitoring and evaluation of their programs to independent consulting organizations.

Similarly, the tertiary education sector has also witnessed huge changes (Johnstone, 1998). The distinction between private and public entities are blurring as universities are now tasked to be financially self-sustainable. There is a demand for flexible and innovative teaching with more experiential learning, study trips, internships and international experience (Trinkle, 2011). As a result, many institutions now rely on adjunct instructors, service providers and consultants with field and industry experience and employ on-site and online teaching and learning resulting the evolution of new education entities. For research, academics are encouraged to apply for external funds and take up consultancies. It not unusual for universities to set up institutes and centres to provide specialised graduate course, trainings and undertake external consultancies.

The Centre is attuned to such changes and to the mobility of knowledge in a socially enabled online environment. It evaluates and designs intervention policies that can contribute to the betterment of societies.

2.1 Vision Statement

The Centre is dedicated to fostering capacity enhancement through social innovation

2.2 Mission Statement

The mission of the Centre is to enhance the capacity of international and non-governmental organizations, education providers, public sector agencies and civil society to make a progressive impact on local communities.

3. Background

The germination period leading to the incorporation of the Centre in 2015, spans some seven years of reflection, conceptualization and preparatory work, including acquisition of infrastructure. The idea of a Centre grew initially out of reflections by Dr. James Gomez on the changing nature of both the tertiary education and not-for profit sectors. Similar, parallel reflections by other members of the Advisory Board and Centre Associates spurred a natural complicity and spirit of innovation that carried forward the idea of the Centre into 2015.

Formal preparations for establishing began in 2012 when a preliminary 6 months study and planning stint was undertaken in Bangkok, Thailand. Working out of an office at Sathorn Square in Bangkok, a 120 sqm commercial space was purchased next to Phayathai BTS Station, logo, social media infrastructure were additionally developed under the name Gomez Centre. A soft introduction by way of several email newsletters were sent out to present the idea of the Centre to key stakeholders and partners. The Centre also received requests for internships from the UK, Japan and Thailand. A part-time staff and several interns contributed towards the Centre's work during this period in 2012.

From 2012 interest in the work of the Centre came from across Southeast Asia. In 2012, the Centre carried out a capacity training program in Moulmein, Myanmar for the benefit of Karen minority groups interested in accessing international human rights mechanisms so as to better protect their cultural heritage in a rapidly changing Myanmar. Interest for collaboration also came from Indonesia, Malaysia, Timor Leste and Vietnam. International Organizations operating in Bangkok have also expressed interest in the Centre's work.

In June 2014, the Centre provided a half day training "Social Media for Development Project" for the German International Cooperation (GIZ) agency in Thailand. The training was attended by 15 participants from GIZ offices and projects in Asia. By end 2014, the Centre's James Gomez and Robin Ramcharan guest edited a special issue of *Journal of Contemporary Southeast Asian Studies* entitled "Democracy and Human Rights in Southeast Asia" published by the German Institute of Global and Area Studies' Institute of Asian Studies.

In January 2015, Dr. Gomez undertook an end of project evaluation on youth participation in civic activities in Morocco for Search for Common Ground. After which a concept paper was formally put together and sent out for consultation to generate feedback and momentum to its formal registration. After a period of close consultations with several key individuals the Asia Centre was registered in Bangkok, Thailand.

Registration

Asia Centre Co., Ltd. was registered on 21 July 2015 as a juristic person under the Civil and Commercial Code of Thailand bearing the Company Registration No. 0105558119135. The Principal Office is located at 128/183, Phayathai Plaza Building, 17th Floor, Phayathai Road, Thung-Phayathai, Ratchatewi, Bangkok, 10400 Thailand. Asia Centre Co., Ltd. has a registered paid up capital of THB 2,000,000. The objects of the company, elaborated in the relevant clauses, largely pertain to providing services in support of education, research and publishing.

7. Organizational Structure

The Centre comprises of an Advisory Board, a Management Team and Centre Associates. The Advisory Board provides guidance on the strategic direction and services the Centre offers its constituents. While the Management Team oversees the daily operations and business activities. The Centre Associates are consultants, volunteers, interns and ambassadors who support the work of the Centre.

7.1 Advisory Board

The Advisory Board provides advice and recommendations on the vision, mission and services offered by the Centre. The Board comprises individuals of international repute who are specialists in their respective fields in the tertiary education sector (in both pedagogy and andragogy), in international organizations and in the civil society sector. They have wide professional and personal experience with issues related to the Asia-Pacific region.

Centre Associates

Centre Associates comprise of individuals such as Consultants, Volunteers, Interns and Centre Ambassadors who also contribute to the Centre's work by devoting their time and expertise.

Consultants

Consultants are academics and practitioners of international repute who are responsible for delivering training and expert advice to stakeholders in their respective areas of competence

Volunteers

Volunteers are drawn from a variety of backgrounds and offer a combination of skills and experience towards the activities of the Centre.

Interns

Graduate students, junior scholars and junior professionals from areas of relevance to the work of the Centre may apply for internships at the Centre.

Centre Ambassadors

A select group of Centre Ambassadors advance the work of the centre in selected regions and globally.

Management Team

Executive Director

The Executive Director (ED) is responsible for implementing the strategic vision elaborated in consultation with the Advisory Board. The ED is responsible for communicating with external parties and matching requests for services with the Centre's areas competence. Overseeing the operations that give effect to the strategic vision, supervision of Centre staff and Associates and the implementation of projects with external parties.

Centre Manager

The Centre Manager (CM) is responsible for the day to day management of the Centre facilities and its usage. The CM is in charge of purchases and supplies related to the Centre's operations and activities. Additionally, provides administrative and accounting support by issuing invoices and receipts, liaising with the relevant government agencies and overseeing human resources needs.

Programme Coordinator

The Programme Coordinator (PC) is responsible for the development of project concept notes and proposals and matching it with partners' needs and requests. This includes scheduling meetings, writing correspondence, emailing, handling visitors, routing callers, and answering questions and requests.

Digital Marketing Executive

The Digital Marketing Executive (DME) assists the Centre's management team by providing communications and marketing support. Task includes the maintenance of all relevant databases and communications platforms of the Centre.

Partners

Asia Centre is well networked with educational institutions, international organizations, non-profit organizations and other institutions in the private, professional and public sector, in Thailand and in the larger Asia-Pacific region. It is therefore able to co-convene activities to extend the reach and scope of the Centre's and its partners' programmes and events.

Programmes

- Academic Courses
- Publishing and Distribution
- Community Engagement

Funding Model

Across the sectors, funding models are changing and social initiatives need to be innovative to find resources to sustain their work (Foster, Kim, & Christiansen, 2009). New ways are needed

to fund social initiative given the grant and aid model is increasingly less sustainable (Routson, 2011). Hence, Asia Centre uses a mixed financial model that draws from the social enterprise, social business, philanthropic models to resource its activities.

Its startup operations were funded through an initial philanthropic endowment to secure its premises, fittings and equipment, and a two-year operational fund. Thereafter, the Centre plans to finance its programmes through a mix of revenue generating and fundraising activities. These include income generated by providing meeting room services, running training programs, undertaking paid consultancies and applying for project grants. In this way, Asia Centre is able to carry out its work in a sustainable manner. The work of the Centre is supported through following sources of funds.

Start Up Capital - Dr Gomez invested an initial sum of 10 million baht. 7 million for the premises, 2 million as paid up capital for Asia Centre Co., Ltd. and 1 million for renovations and on-site office furniture and electronic equipment. This allows the Centre a two-year start-up phase to begin operations and work towards being sustainable.

Business Activities – Revenue is an important element for the sustainability of Asia Centre to pay for staff and to cover operational and administrative costs. The Centre seeks to generate revenue from the following business activities:

Spaces – Meeting Services

Learning - Courses

Events – Conferences and Workshops

Services – Management and Professional Services

Publications – Sale of Publications

Merchandising – Sale of Souvenirs (bags, mugs, t-shirts)

Grants

The Centre will work with partners to jointly apply for funds or receive project specific grants to execute dedicated programmes and activities.

Membership - Centre memberships will also be introduced to persons who are interested to fund the Centre's work through membership fees. Memberships are 3,000 baht to join for the first year and subsequent year memberships are 2,000 baht a year. Upon joining members get a welcome pack of Asia Centre merchandise. Membership also comes with a discount for paid events and the price of meeting facilities use.

Donations - Public activities to engage with the wider community of the Centre are managed and administered through donations provided by benefactors and well-wishers. The Centre asks participants at the Centre's free events to make a voluntary contribution. It also has plans to set

up website based contributions and a donation box for visitors to a make a contribution when they visit the centre.

Since Incorporation

During the period July 2015 - Dec 2015, the Centre focused on its legal and financial registration in Thailand. This involved compliance with various Thai ministry regulations and requirement. This period also focused on the renovation and setting up the physical premises of the Centre including the purchase and installation of furniture and fittings. Various individuals were also identified to serve on the Advisory Board, as Centre Associates and make up the Management Team.

With the legal, financial and physical elements in place, Asia Centre opened its doors for operations in January of 2016. The next phase - January to June 2016 - focused on establishing the Centre's brand and promoting its presence in Bangkok. The Asia Centre Seminars were launched to ignite interest in the Centre among Bangkok based academia, NGOs and students. The seminars provided a platform for discussion on topics affecting contemporary Southeast Asia and beyond and involved speakers from around the region. During this period, the Centre also set up meetings and explore opportunities for collaboration with numerous NGOS, social enterprises, businesses as well as university departments and faculties. The Centre in this time signed partnershipos with Asian Research Centre in Estonia, the Indian Association for Asian and Pacific Studies (IAAPS), an internship placement firm AIPGlobal.co and Malaysian book publisher Gerakabudaya. These partnership help promote Asia Centre beyond its Bangkok base.

Having established a basic presence and network, from July 2016 to December 2016, the Centre will shift its priority focus from community engagement towards creating a sustainable business. This will see the Center applying for grants, launching paid courses and workshops and stepping up efforts at marketing the space to Bangkok based NGOs. The goal is to strike a balance between community engagement and business activities in order to develop an organisational and funding model that is proactive, innovative and self-sustainable. In December 2016, stocking will be done of Asia Centre's work and an annual strategic plan will be developed for 2017.

Author

Dr. James Gomez has over twenty years of experience in the development and tertiary education sector. He volunteers as Executive Director, Asia Centre, Bangkok, Thailand and is Professor and Associate Dean (International Affairs), School of Communication Arts, Bangkok University, Thailand.

References

1. Armstrong, L, Barriers to Innovation & Change in Higher Education by TIAA-CREF Institute. Available at:<https://www.tiaainstitute.org/public/pdf/barriers-to-innovation-and-change-in-higher-education.pdf>
2. Foster, W.L., Kim, P. & Christiansen, B., 2009. Ten Nonprofit Funding Models in *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Available at:<http://ssir.org/articles/entry/ten_nonprofit_funding_models>
3. Foundation for Advanced Studies on International Development (FASID), 2005. *New Approaches to Development and Changing Sector Issues*. Available at: http://www.fasid.or.jp/files/e_publication_trends/3/newapproaches.pdf
4. Johnstone, B.D. 1998 ,*The Financing and Management of Higher Education: A Status Report on Worldwide Reforms* presented at UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education, held in Paris, France on October 5-9, 1998. Available at: https://c33c6999-a-62cb3a1a-s-sites.googlegroups.com/site/asambleadeestudiantesuc/documentos-sobre-el-eees-/documentos-oficiales/FinanciacionyAdministraciondelaEducacionSuperior%28BancoMundial%2C1998%29.pdf?attachauth=ANoY7crQG-v-GiDbrvaAM2NXGUErcUcUUftCFz8DqBaaNYU9ffafXgR5QFXTreckct0LxoZ6JdluiaohD1igJk5iyzvpUxGcWprK4XWf0vHuWpVU6lroNwBikOws-wJ0UgUunfqXECzcMF5wIH1RUD9Q9b3Tk5Q7Pgam3e0yt4lgKtkW_p0OfbmRazahmV9wzLz5YBnUf5_b2sPV1dBJsuAMXz_3L579RQ6jbTHL0YGKOOs7p3fC0B-1jJ4hDLv0a3YZIGExC6NY_Xl140gnSgHdb_Yol8gdTr85wC45HJiNIQeSA7FytsnomdES-kF4HfY36IRdb6X92elp8wFvPBWo07pH_H9KNGo9oIzNLTGsh8kOicF7Aw5sq3A4qcRKNqXbNGB_30&attredirects=0
5. McCloskey, S.,2012. Aid, NGOs and the Development Sector: Is it time for a new direction?' in *Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review*, Vol. 15, Autumn, pp. 113-121. Available at:<http://www.developmenteducationreview.com/issue15-viewpoint>
6. Nyssens,M 2006. *Social Enterprise At the Crossroads of Market, Public Policies and Civil Society*, Routledge, New York.
7. Rouston,J,2011. Nonprofits Must Change as Old Funding Models Decline. Available at:<https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/nonprofits-must-change-old-funding-models-decline>
8. Trinkle,D.A, 2011, The Changing Landscape of Higher Education in *Educause Review*.Available at:<http://er.educause.edu/articles/2011/2/the-changing-landscape-of-higher-education>