

Pollinating social entrepreneurship in India

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Katerina Kimmorley describes how research conducted for her LSE master's dissertation inspired her to co-found a social business, Pollinate Energy, in Bangalore.

I looked at my watch: it was 2 a.m. My master's dissertation research in India was complete. Another eight hours' flight and I would be back in London. As the plane ascended, I peered out to what should have been the vast, twinkling metropolis of Delhi. But I saw only small pockets of light. Little did I realise that northern India had just been plunged into darkness, victim to the largest blackout the world had ever known.



That night — Tuesday, 31 July 2012 — 600-700 million people, 10 per cent of the world's population were without light. Arriving in London, I saw that coverage of the catastrophe dominated the front page of every newspaper. But the bigger tragedy — the real story — was ignored: 300-400 million Indian people live without access to electricity every night, including the 102 families that had been the subjects of my research.

For me, this was a sign. I declined the government job I had just been offered; instead, I returned to India, continued my research, and co-founded a social business, Pollinate Energy, aimed at helping solve energy poverty.

My research into the poorest urban households without access to electricity had revealed a relatively high willingness to pay for light and electricity services. High enough, in fact, to be solved by a small solar home lighting system. It had also shown that families with children at school were willing to pay considerably more for light, proving the value of light for study and family activities. It had been the first research study of its kind in India, and I now needed to turn this research into tangible action.

Over the next three months my fellow co-founders and I spent days and nights trailing every solar light on the market and evaluating every distribution method we could conceive. After much failing and 'pivoting' we articulated our three-fold goals:

- Improve the lives of India's urban poor, initially by the providing solar lights.
- Support entrepreneurship in local communities by training entrepreneurs to provide solar lights.
- Bring the concept of 'social business' into the mainstream by training other young leaders to become social entrepreneurs through what became our [Fellowship](#) and [Young Professionals Programmes](#).

To achieve these goals we created a new social business model that used support from international fellows and Indian interns to train and launch local entrepreneurs, a.k.a. “pollinators”, to service the urban slums around Bangalore.

Through all this I learnt 10 key things that helped me turn my dissertation research into our social enterprise:

1. **For your dissertation, pick a subject you really care about**, preferably that you will never be brave enough to do again.
2. **Make sure you contribute something interesting about the subject**, e.g. through a new quantitative analysis. This will probably mean that what you are doing is new or difficult, which means you are adding value. This will make you interesting to other market players and enable you to contribute something to the field.
3. **Watch out for what you least expect**. This can be the giant elephant in the room you aren’t noticing because you are so focused on your research question.
4. **Find friends in your industry**. They will no doubt go on to become your co-founders, first donors or investors, mentors and more – and remember, the road is lonely alone.
5. **Know your whys (why this? why now? why me?)** and make sure you are convinced by them.
6. **Fail or “pivot” lots**. You only get one pilot phase.
7. **Use your critical university brain** to identify all the problems, hypocrisies, and plain dumb things you are doing.
8. **Then turn off your critical university brain and start doing**. Lots!
9. **Don’t worry about not having the skills**. You will not know what you don’t have until you don’t have it. And then you’ll learn the skills or collaborate with an expert.
10. **Look forward to jumping out of bed every day because you can’t wait to get to work**. It’s corny to say, but true.

I have now returned to LSE as a PhD student to see if I can better measure the impact of Pollinate Energy’s work on the families we serve. It was a privilege to be guided by so many leading environmental economists and thinkers during my master’s degree at LSE, and I know being back will inspire many more life changing adventures.

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