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# Framing a generative common purpose: how social entrepreneurs achieve social innovation

Kevin Levillain

Centre de Gestion Scientifique, MINES ParisTech, 60 bvd St Michel, 75006 Paris, France  
E-mail: kevin.levillain@mines-paristech.fr

Marine Agogue\*

HEC Montréal, 3000 chemin de la Côte Sainte-Catherine, H2T 2A7 Montréal, Canada  
E-mail: marine.agogue@hec.ca

Elsa Berthet

INRA UMR 1048 Sadapt, 16 rue Claude Bernard, 75231 Paris cedex, France  
E-mail: elsa.berthet@agroparistech.fr

\* Corresponding author

**Abstract:** Social entrepreneurs are said to be intrinsically innovative, but their capabilities to develop social innovations have not been theorized yet. In this paper, we address this “innovation paradox” identified by Peattie and Morley: we explore the role of the purpose as a key factor for social entrepreneurs to design radical innovations. We draw upon a deep longitudinal case study on a firm committed to the fight against malnutrition. Our analysis highlights how this firm has continuously renewed its purpose to open innovative paths and involve new partners. We identify this as the capacity to frame “generative common purposes”, meaning the constant renewal of a conceptual social purpose so that to stimulate collaborative innovation. This opens up new research perspectives on the articulation of innovation processes and social entrepreneurship.

**Keywords:** *Social entrepreneur; social innovation; common purpose; social mission*

## **Introduction**

Over the last decade, social entrepreneurs have become central figures in the innovation literature. Social entrepreneurship scholars highlight that the distinguishing feature of these entrepreneurs is their willingness to drive a deep social change (Martin & Osberg, 2007), and as such they must rely on innovative value propositions to increase “social value” and manage complex social problem. However the literature on social entrepreneurship is mainly focused on the issue of formulating and protecting a social purpose, but does not address the question of the emergence of radical innovations to achieve the desired social change. Paradoxically the booming literature on social innovation (Dees & Anderson, 2006; Dacin, Dacin, & Matear, 2010) does not describe this emergence either: studies are mainly focused on the expression of the social needs of the beneficiaries and the adaptation of innovation processes to available resources, but they do not tackle the issue of who develops such social innovations and how. Indeed, few studies have addressed how social entrepreneurs can actually develop social innovation or what their skills should be to develop social innovation. This paper aims to contribute to deepen our understanding of the relationships between social entrepreneurs and social innovation by exploring specifically the role of the common purpose as a key factor for social entrepreneurs to design radical social innovation(s).

The paper is structured as follows. First, we review the literature on social entrepreneurship and social innovation, and we highlight its inherent “innovation paradox”: because innovation is thought to be intrinsic to social entrepreneurship, social innovation has virtually never been theorized per se. We underline that the social purpose is key in social entrepreneurship and hypothesize that it can play a crucial role to

sustain radical innovation processes. Then, we present a longitudinal case study of a French SME, Nutriset, to investigate the link between social entrepreneurship, social innovation and the common purpose. Based on 52 individual semi-structured interviews conducted between March 2011 and January 2013, our findings suggest that Nutriset reconfigured the field of treatment of severe malnutrition for young children, renewing the common purpose on this issue and impacting the capabilities of other actors in the ecosystem. Our analysis shows that Nutriset was able to renew several times its purpose in a way that stimulated collaborative innovation: on the one hand, it allowed the firm to redefine (and generally extend) its activities in order to develop innovation, and on the other hand it led to involve new partners in the process.

## **Literature review**

### *From “social entrepreneurship” to “social innovation”*

Despite practices acknowledged for several decades, social entrepreneurship (SE) is a recent theoretical construct. In 1998, Dees proposed the first well-recognized definition of SE as combining the “passion of a social mission with an image of business-like discipline [and] innovation”, and traced back the term “entrepreneur” to the so-called “Say-Schumpeterian” tradition depicting entrepreneurs as “catalysts and innovators behind economic progress” (Dees 1998b). Since then, several important papers have completed this definition and helped better characterize what SE is. Mort, Weerawardena, and Carnegie (2003) conceptualized it as a “multidimensional construct” including the willingness to serve a social mission and innovative decision-making; Mair and Marti (2006) consider it as a catalyser of social change that is not dominated by financial benefit for the entrepreneurs; and Peredo and McLean (2006) define it as a

situation where people are primarily concerned with creating social value while “employing innovation”.

Across the literature, two pervasive characteristics seem to be distinctive features of SE: the “social purpose” (Dacin, Dacin, and Matear 2010) or “value proposition” (Martin and Osberg 2007) aiming to put social benefit (creating societal welfare or answering social needs that are not sufficiently worked upon) before the business or financial value they create with their enterprises, and the major role of innovation to create solutions that achieve this purpose.

According to Dees and Anderson (2006), this focus on innovation comes from a recent school of thought of SE that they have called “social innovation”. This new perspective helped overcome the restrictive definition of Social Enterprise as a Not-For-Profit structure creating a profit-generating scheme to achieve sustainability. Instead, it defines SE as a process of creating innovative solutions to answer societal issues, no matter what the form of the business may be.

#### *The “innovation paradox” of social entrepreneurs*

For Dees and Anderson, social innovation is intrinsic to SE, and “social enterprise without at least some element of innovation is not particularly interesting from a theoretical point of view” (Dees and Anderson 2006). Yet, the SE literature is faced with a huge paradox regarding social innovation: being thought as an intrinsic feature of SE, it has virtually never been theorized per se! Some authors (Dacin, Dacin, and Matear 2010) even wonder whether social innovation really has distinctive characteristics at all, or is just classical innovation with social motives.

Peattie and Morley (2008) have well underlined this paradox that they called the “innovation paradox”. They stress that social enterprises are generally thought to be

“inherently innovative” for the very simple reason that because they address, in a sustainable way, social problems that were left unsolved, they were necessarily innovative to begin with. This rationale would then exempt researchers from further specifying how entrepreneurs develop their innovation capabilities. Yet, “some authors debate the extent to which social entrepreneurs tend to be innovative [...] when they are not widely involved in research and development activities and spending” (Peattie & Morley, 2008).

#### *A need to build a social entrepreneurship-related innovation theory*

Several papers have tried to underline the particularities of social innovation. But by demonstrating the scarcity of resources that are available to entrepreneurs willing to design sustainable solutions, their main endeavour is to understand how the entrepreneurs match these limited resources to challenging needs. In most cases, these studies show incremental innovations aiming at adapting existing solutions for wealthy populations to the targeted socio-economic context. The “Bottom of the Pyramid” approach (see for example (Prahalad 2012)) is indeed more concerned with the “Four As” (Access, Affordability, Awareness and Availability) that requires adaptation of existing products rather than reasoning from blank sheet to create radical innovation. In this perspective, Christensen et al. (2006) developed the concept of “catalytic innovations” to describe innovations that “meet the needs of either underserved or not served people” by developing products and services that are “simpler and less costly than existing alternatives”. Further, these papers do not describe the actual innovation processes and the role social entrepreneurs play in developing these social innovations.

As regards innovation processes, the scarcity of resources fosters analyses as “bricolage” processes (Gundry et al. 2011, Zahra et al. 2009) and very few papers have

observed more systematic approaches, except a recent paper promoting “design thinking” to replace end-user in the whole innovation process (Brown and Wyatt 2010). Overall, this seems to ascertain the difficulty for SE theorists to positively characterize social innovation. As Short et al. (2009) put it, “innovation is a key theme in social entrepreneurship research, but more effort is needed to build social entrepreneurship-related innovation theory”.

According to the literature on innovation management, designing a radical innovation usually requires bridging heterogeneous actors around a shared vision (O'Connor & Veryzer, 2001; Segrestin 2005), and enabling conceptual breakthroughs through exploration processes (Le Masson, Weil, and Hatchuel 2010). The common feature of social entrepreneurs identified by Dacin et al. (2010), *i.e.* defining the social needs to meet and the population to target through a social purpose, is certainly not sufficient to explain how radical social innovations can be developed. However our hypothesis is that the social purpose can play a crucial role to sustain radical innovation processes, if it has some specific characteristics enabling radical innovation. Our research question is then the following: How can social entrepreneurs define their social purpose so that it both attracts relevant innovation partners and fosters conceptual breakthroughs?

## **Methodology**

### *A case study approach*

To investigate the role of the purpose to support the emergence of social innovation in an entrepreneurial setting, we conducted a case study within Nutriset, a Small French company founded by the entrepreneur Michel Lescanne in the mid-80s. The social purpose of this company is to invent, produce and distribute solutions for the treatment

and prevention of malnutrition in Southern countries. Initially a very small regional company, the firm has now become a world leader in the field.

Nutriset is an interesting case to investigate the link between social entrepreneurship, social innovation and the common purpose for several reasons. First, to meet its purpose, it has had to work with a large variety of industrial and institutional partners (from NGOs to banks), with various expectations, thus pushing its founder (and then president) into clarifying regularly its purpose. Second, Nutriset has designed revolutionary products that have deeply transformed the way malnutrition is treated today, which can be acknowledged as a deep social change. And lastly, Nutriset has diversified its activities over the years, designing products not only to treat but also to prevent malnutrition, and more recently to help Southern populations develop local quality food systems. Our thorough analysis of the evolution of Nutriset's social purpose and its growing innovative activities provided good empirical data to analyze over a long period of time the development of the innovation capabilities of a social entrepreneur.

As our interest in this paper is to fill in a literature gap by getting a better understanding of the relationships between social entrepreneurs and social innovation, we chose an exploratory research design (Yin 2010, Eisenhardt 1989). The qualitative, case study approach (Eisenhardt 1989, Bell and Bryman 2007) was thought suitable as it provides a way to gain a more profound understanding of a very specific issue, which could not have been accomplished by using another type of research approach.

### *Data collection*

To conduct this case study, we started by collecting data from 52 individual semi-structured interviews within Nutriset, between March 2011 and January 2013. Each interview lasted between of 1 to 3 hours each. We met with 34 employers of Nutriset,



including the founder Michel Lescanne and the 2 top managers. We met several times with these three central actors over the time span of our study. We chose to interview both people present in the early years of the founding of the company and newcomers, as well as individuals whose profiles (lawyer, nutritionist, project managers responsible for marketing and innovation) seemed to provide additional insights. We completed those internal interviews with 6 interviews of 2 hours each with partners of Nutriset, in NGOs, research institutes or industrial partners in the Southern countries. In total, we compiled and analyzed 144 hours of interviews.

We completed these with the attendance of two internal workshops involving participant observation (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994). The first workshop was held in May 2011 and aimed to debrief of the lack of success of one of the firm's product. It involved 12 executives from Nutriset and one external consultant. The second one was a creative workshop held in April 2013 on the exploration of different strategies to design products or services to treat and prevent malnutrition in Indonesia. It involved 13 executives and 3 external animators of the workshop.

Those interviews were completed by the analysis of archive documents from 2005 to 2013 (past presentations, emails, internal reports) that were shared with us by Nutriset.

### *Data Analysis*

Drawing upon a longitudinal case study, our research objective is to highlight the crucial properties and skills of social entrepreneurs to be able to develop social innovations. Therefore, our research investigation is twofold: (i) understand how Nutriset managed to develop a series of social innovations, i.e. how this firm mobilized resources (knowledge, funding...) as well as relevant actors to develop such innovations, and (ii) explicit how these activities were articulated with their social purpose: "meet the needs

of malnourished children”, purpose which may evolve over time.

Therefore, we conducted the different interviews so that to understand the different phases of development of the firm and linked those innovation activities with the discourses and purposes defined by Nutriset managers. We built an analysis grid focusing on three main aspects of Nutriset development phases: the nature of the activities undertaken by Nutriset, the link with external partners and the formulation of the goal to achieve. Table 1 presents examples of the different types of questions asked to the interviewees regarding those three elements:

**Table 1** Grid for data collection (interview guide)

<i>Main development phase aspects</i>	<i>Activities</i>	<i>Actors &amp; Partners</i>	<i>Common purpose</i>
Types of asked questions	- What were the first paths you explored to achieve your common purpose?	- Who were you working with?	- What were you aiming for? What was your initial idea?
	-What were your successes /mistakes?	- Did your relationships evolved over time and if so, what triggered the evolution?	- How did you make your design choices?
	- What were the ideas that you explored but failed to achieve?		- How did you present your project / approach to potential new partners?

## Case description

### *Malnutrition: definition and context*

Malnutrition can be defined as a condition caused by an imbalance of dietary energy, essential fatty acids, protein, vitamins and minerals. According to the NGO “Médecins

Sans Frontières”, a third of the eight million annual deaths of children under 5 years old is due to malnutrition, 175 million children are undernourished today in the world (20 million are in a situation of severe malnutrition). It is estimated that only 3% the percentage of malnourished children actually receive appropriate treatment. Moreover, the World Food Program in 2011 fed 90 million people for \$ 3 billion<sup>1</sup>.

### *The first humanitarian actions to fight malnutrition*

In the 1970s, there was no specific product for the treatment of severe acute malnutrition of children. Food aid was indeed based on the shipment of agricultural surplus from the Northern countries to the Southern ones. However, such strategy did not provide a specific response to the nutritional needs of young children in situations of malnutrition: it provided mainly calorific nutrients but few proteins, vitamins and minerals. The first specific products for the treatment of malnutrition appeared in the early 1980s in the form of flour and biscuits enriched in proteins. However these products did not meet the expectations of nutritionists and doctors, as they were not specific from a nutritional point of view: they required the addition of vitamin and minerals that were generally administered to children with a spoon, which was neither effective nor precise enough.

### *The creation of Nutriset: producing specific food for malnourished children*

Nutriset was founded in 1986 by Michel Lescanne, an engineer coming from the food industry. He created his company around the strong commitment to "feed the children", by formulating products for undernourished children. Lescanne's initial experimentations were focused on food enriched with protein. His products were initially very artisanal,

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<sup>1</sup> Data from the World Food Program (WFP) available at <http://www.wfp.org/hunger/stats>

mainly biscuits, made of powdered milk, sugar, flour and soy. Ingredients were always somewhat similar; the challenge was to combine them into stable formulations. Indeed in the mid-80s, the company (3 persons at the time) aimed to produce solutions against malnutrition for countries in conflict (Kosovo, Palestine), by designing food products formulas and by organizing their production and distribution. Thanks to these first endeavors, Nutriset built a learning relationship with a variety of partners: nutritionists specialized in malnutrition, NGOs deploying volunteers in refugee camps, doctors in villages and health centers as well as various ministries of agriculture and / or health in the concerned countries. Nutriset set up privileged relations with West African countries – Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger – in a very empirical approach.

#### *The development of the first therapeutic milk: F-100*

1992-1993 was a next step for the development of Nutriset: the firm got closer to the most renowned nutritionists in the field, particularly with researchers from the French NGO « Action contre la faim ». Nutriset learned greatly on what was actually malnutrition, i.e. a true pathology with diverse consequences (diarrhea, dehydration, deficiencies) that may be very dangerous for children in addition to the lack of nutriment.

In 1993, the French NGO « Médecins sans Frontières » set up a meeting involving the most influential nutritionists to agree on a universal formulae of a hypothetic product to give to young children in order to treat severe acute malnutrition. Michel Lescanne was allowed to participate in this meeting. In the following weeks, using his know-how on formulating dairy products, he created a powdered therapeutic milk, called F-100, which formulae responded exactly to the nutritionists' recommendations. Nutritionists and NGO doctors then became aware that their demands and theoretical ideas could actually

be transformed into products.

### *The design of a ready-to-use-product: Plumpy'Nut*

During the crisis in Rwanda in 1993-1994, NGOs such as « Action contre la Faim » used the F-100 therapeutic milk. However, their feedbacks were underwhelming. First, as there were security problems in the refugee camps where the products were distributed, NGO members had to leave the camp every night. As a consequence, children who needed to be fed every 2 hours were not. This problem caused many deaths. Second, the powdered milk required a distribution at the refugee camp or health center, which could be a problem for families living in remote villages. Third, the milk dilution could lead to bacteriological contamination problems.

From 1995 onwards, Nutriset focused on designing a product that could be administrated at night, as it would not require preparation in the health center. This line of work did not question the nutritional formulation of the F-100. It intended mainly to help logisticians by designing a new type of product with a different approach on the preparation but matching again the same theoretical formulae. The design process had four objectives: to create a product that would not require any preparation, that could be distributed individually, that would reduce the risk of bacterial contamination (due to food and water mix) and that would facilitate transportation.

After many explorations of various biscuits, dough with very high fat rates, candies or chocolate bars, Nutriset developed an extensive expertise on the texture of food products and on the behavior of fatty acids. It mobilized varied external expertise (e.g. how to ensure minerals stability within a fat matrix, non-fat separation and degradation of nutrients, lasting good taste...). Plumpy'Nut, the first ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTF) product was designed in 1996 in collaboration with André Briend, a French

paediatric nutritionist. It is a peanut-based nutritional paste with a high vitamin and mineral content conditioned in individual sachets. It can be used directly, without any prior preparation, and children don't need any kind of help to eat from the sachet.

This innovation stemmed from collaborations and explorations with nutritionists and NGOs experts that made it possible to gather sets of heterogeneous knowledge held by various actors. Plumpy'Nut immediately revolutionized the treatment of malnutrition, as its use required a deep evolution of the administration of products for the treatment of malnutrition and the organization of health centers and NGOs. Moreover, due to the possibility to expand product distribution that did not require preparation any more, the number of children benefitting from the treatment increased exponentially. In 2000, Nutriset developed its own factory to control the entire production process of its products. It developed a portfolio of products under the form of lipid-based RUTF (and also Ready-to-Use Supplementary Food, or RUSF) for the treatment or prevention of acute malnutrition. In 2007, during the crisis in Darfur, UNICEF officially recommended using Plumpy'Nut in the treatment of severe acute malnutrition, labeling the success of Nutriset. Since then, Nutriset developed a wide range of paste-based products to treat different forms of malnutrition, but also to prevent the development of child malnutrition.

#### *The set-up of a network of therapeutic food producers in Southern countries*

In 2005, Nutriset launched a program of co-development, PlumpyField. The idea was to produce therapeutic food in the countries where it was needed (for instance in Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Niger and Sudan). PlumpyField is now a network of manufacturers from different Southern countries who share a common vision on fighting malnutrition and who are bound by an agreement inspired by the franchising system. In

2012, the network counted 17 members who manufacture and market the different products developed by Nutriset. But these local entrepreneurs are not just part of a franchise network: knowledge and skills are exchanged on a regular basis, on both commercial (including logistics and supply chain) and technical (production process, assistance for the implementation of quality system, follow-up and training, etc.) aspects. Indeed the products coming from the factories of the PlumpyField members must be of the same quality as those produced by Nutriset to be certified by global authorities such as UNICEF. Besides, the ambition of the network is to create a space for future joint projects, either from a R&D or a distribution approach, and multiple seminars are held every year to share practices, new technologies and potential ideas.

*The emergence of a broader action: the development of Onyx*

The innovative journey of Nutriset led its founder Michel Lescanne to explore new facets of nutrition in Southern countries and to develop new activities. In 2011, the formerly financial holding of Nutriset, called Onyx and also founded by the Lescanne family, was given an new role as a “development fund” dedicated to create local value and sustainable services in Southern countries where nutrition is a major stake, yet taking an active role in the development, technical support and design of financed projects. This way, profits that were generated through Nutriset’s activities were reinvested in projects that have a larger scope than those of Nutriset, which are specifically oriented towards malnutrition treatment and prevention. For instance, Onyx projects may include Northern partners, or deal with issues such as the assessment of food products quality through the construction of a medical lab or the consolidation of strong national food chains through the development of high-end agribusinesses in these countries.

## **Findings**

Our case study shows that Nutriset reconfigured the field of treatment of severe malnutrition for young children, renewing the common purpose on this issue and impacting the capabilities of other actors in the ecosystem. We framed the different steps of evolution of the firm that coincided with a continuous regeneration of the firm's purpose and with a progressive enlargement of its ecosystem (see Table 2).

First, Nutriset's treatment of malnutrition in the 80s was based on research on fortified food (with high levels of proteins) conducted empirically with NGOs. Although Michel Lescanne indeed formulated a purpose to drive its first explorations, it was expressed as to "feed children", a broad unspecific objective that represented his great ambition but also the lack of knowledge of the ecosystem on malnutrition at the time. The first innovative product developed by Nutriset, the F-100 therapeutic milk, came with the rewording of that purpose into "Feeding appropriately children suffering from severe malnutrition", understood as a pathology, in the mid-90s. Nutritionists and doctors conducting basic research managed to define properly malnutrition, leading Nutriset to research and develop specific treatment.

Taking into account the feedbacks about the difficulties to administrate treatment, Nutriset then focused on a specific purpose representing the stakes of the whole ecosystem engaged in the fighting against malnutrition: NGOs local medical centres, nutritionists, etc. We can, in retrospect, formulate this purpose as "Feeding appropriately children suffering from severe malnutrition at home and without contamination", which is the goal that was shared but not as explicitly expressed at that time. In fact, the bet of Nutriset was to avoid focusing on already developed products such as therapeutic milk while gathering interests from the ecosystem through that kind of conceptual purpose.



This led to the development and production of RUTF, a new specific name that stresses the innovativeness of Plumpy’Nut.

A new demonstration of the interest of such a purpose comes with the development of products for the prevention of malnutrition. Before identifying the prevention of malnutrition as a specific objective that differs from treatment, several attempts were made to design prevention products, which proved to be insufficiently used. Acknowledging the fundamental differences between preventing and curing, including the affected ecosystem of stake holders, Nutriset then specified different subsets of purposes to address innovatively this question (“prevention of malnutrition”, “treatment of moderate malnutrition” and “chronic malnutrition”), which gave different successful products that enriched the range of products proposed by the SME.

Then, when Nutriset started to develop a network of entrepreneurs in Southern countries to fight malnutrition in 2000-2002, this action was also supported by a reframing of the purpose: “Nutritional autonomy of Southern countries”. This intentionally conceptual purpose was formulated as to invite actors in Southern countries (e.g. industrial partners and governments) to participate in the adventure. Since 2011, Nutriset and its holding Onyx have re-set their strategy, and decided to address “the choice of a quality alimentation”. Accordingly, they currently develop spin-off activities beyond malnutrition, and involving a wider set of stakeholders.

**Table 2** Evolution of the common purpose pursued by Nutriset

	<i>Formulation of the common purpose</i>	<i>Nutriset Activities</i>	<i>Stakeholders involved</i>
Phase 0: First endeavors to fight malnutrition	Feeding children suffering from malnutrition	R&D activities: combining nutritional products to make handy therapeutic food	Nutriset, Governments, NGOs

Phase 1: Development of the first therapeutic milk	Feeding appropriately children suffering from severe malnutrition	R&D: Embody the nutritionists' formula into a therapeutic milk	Nutriset NGOs and WHO <sup>1</sup> Nutritionists
Phase 2: Development of the first RUTF for the treatment of severe acute malnutrition	Feeding appropriately children suffering from severe malnutrition, at home without contamination	R&D: development of the first RUTF. Production and distribution of malnutrition treatment.	Nutriset NGOs, medical centers, governments and United Nations agencies Nutritionists Families
Phase 2bis: Enrichment of the products range with products to fight moderate malnutrition	Subsets of purposes: Prevention of malnutrition, treatment of chronic malnutrition...	R&D: development of the new formula for supplementary food ("RUSF").	Nutriset NGOs, governments and United Nations agencies Nutritionists Families
Phase 3: Development of an industrial network in Southern countries specialized in the treatment of malnutrition	Fostering the nutritional autonomy of Southern countries	R&D, production and distribution of malnutrition treatment + Management of the industrial network	Nutriset NGOs, governments and United Nations agencies Nutritionists Families Industrial Partners in Southern countries
Phase 4 : Development of spin-off activities beyond malnutrition	The choice of a quality alimentation	Exploring social change projects on different facets of nutrition in Southern countries	Nutriset NGOs, governments and United Nations agencies Nutritionists Families Industrial Partners in Southern countries Industrial and research Partners in Northern countries

This analysis shows that Nutriset was able to renew several times its purpose in a way that stimulated collaborative innovation: on the one hand, it made it possible for the firm to redefine (and generally extend) its activities in order to develop innovations, and on the other hand it led to involve new partners in the process. Table 2 shows how the successive purposes formulated by Nutriset led to a twofold expansion process: the multiplication of innovative concepts and the development of new partnerships.

This ability to generate successive and widening common purposes at a conceptual level was a key element in the success of Nutriset to develop jointly with other partners disruptive social innovations to fight malnutrition. We identified that Nutriset was able to frame “generative common purposes”, i.e. purposes that both foster radical innovation and expand partnerships. This ability seems to be crucial for social entrepreneurs that

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization

aim to develop social innovations to be able to manage their innovation ecosystem.

We can identify some key features that allowed Nutriset to develop these generative common purposes. First we analysed that it is the strong proximity and interactions between Nutriset and its partners that helped the firm defining its common purpose. For instance, Nutriset pursued its R&D activity after the creation of the F-100 therapeutic milk towards the development of RUTF because it had very precise information from NGOs about product administration constraints. Second, the firm always dedicated efforts to R&D activities, both internally and in collaboration with international leading universities and experts in the field. In doing so, Nutriset managed to anchor a collective action around its purpose, generating new pathways for future innovations. Third, the ability of the firm to constantly put in question the approaches they had been following ensured that the series of purposes preserved “generative” characteristics and extended the competences of the firm instead of further specifying them and entrench the future of the firm in a single path.

Yet, the firm is still confronted today with unexplored spaces regarding malnutrition, and struggles for instance with the exploration of new distribution systems for preventive products – as NGOs might not be the best distributors for that specific purpose. New purposes are currently formulated, with the expectation that it will generate interest and capabilities among the ecosystem to enable the prevention of malnutrition to thrive.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

We aimed to highlight in this paper some specific capacities of social entrepreneurs to develop radical social innovation(s). Social innovation generally requires involving various actors. Organizing cooperation between them is all the more difficult that

incitation cannot be only economic. Our case study showed that creating and re-inventing continuously a purpose that is both generating conceptual breakthroughs and common to the partners allowed Nutriset to generate potentially interesting paths for a collective exploration, in order to build new forms of cooperation for social change.

These findings contribute to characterize two pervasive objects in the social entrepreneurship literature that have still not been satisfactorily theorized: the social mission (Dacin, Dacin, and Matear 2010) and the innovation capabilities (Peattie and Morley 2008, Short, Moss, and Lumpkin 2009). Indeed, we highlight criteria that allow social entrepreneurs to assess the quality of their social mission regarding its contribution to the creation of efficient disruptive innovations. This helps overcoming the somewhat unfruitful expression of the mission as to “create social value” even though the definition of “social value” is questionable (see for example (Peredo and McLean 2006) or the debates about what is conscious capitalism between O'Toole and Vogel (2011) and Mackey (2011)). Our proposal is that social entrepreneurs need to create social missions that are both “generative”, which means likely to generate conceptual cognitive breakthrough instead of focusing on the already known aspects of the social issue to be solved, and “common”, that is, designed to gather around critical partners in an ever-growing relevant ecosystem. In doing so, it helps to build a bridge between the two elements of social entrepreneurship – mission and innovation. Our findings suggest that framing a “generative common purpose” is the first step of a successfully innovative social enterprise by helping social entrepreneurs to go beyond “bricolage” processes (Garud & Karnoe, 2003) – which are limited to building with what is at hand – and to federate joint innovative action.

The question whether this capacity to frame a “generative common purpose” is

specific to social entrepreneurs is a legitimate one. We acknowledge that provoking cognitive conceptual breakthrough (O'Connor & Veryzer, 2001; Rice et al, 2001) and gathering an appropriate ecosystem to sustain radical innovation (Adner & Kappor, 2010) are not recommendations that should be specific to social entrepreneurs: they are major results of the innovation management literature today. But we suggest that the “generative common purpose” is an opportunity they might be better positioned to grasp, for two main reasons. First, literature has shown that unlike classical firms, social enterprises already rely on the expression of a unifying social purpose. Yet, several authors have shown that the logic pertaining to a social purpose might be ill-suited to business-like and innovative decisions that the commercial aspect of social enterprises require (Dees 1998a, Battilana and Dorado 2010, Pache and Santos 2012, Galaskiewicz and Barringer 2012). They therefore already have the basic material, but only lack the form in which this material must be shaped to ensure it will boost creativity and innovative practices rather than entrench a restrictive social approach.

Second, social entrepreneurs often face a higher challenge in gathering the appropriate ecosystem because it is often composed of very contrasted actors in institutional terms (government-dependent and private actors, for-profit and non-profit organizations..., see for example (Pache and Santos 2012, Battilana et al. 2012)) and in personal motives (weak economic incentives, varied performance criteria...). Moreover, organizing cooperation between actors and promoting exploration is all the more difficult that incitation cannot be only economic and that resources are scarce. Framing a generative common purpose might reflect the value that stakeholders may be looking for in that type of partnership, in a better manner than complex contractual relationships do (see for example (Kale and Singh 2009) on the difficulties of NGOs-firms alliances).

Finally our research opens up perspectives for future research on the articulation of innovation processes and social entrepreneurship. It would be interesting to extend the framework of a generative common purpose to other social entrepreneurial adventures that fostered radical innovation in order to highlight key factors for the development of social innovation. Current literature is shy on opening the black box of the design of social innovation, yet our contribution might offer a perspective to do so. Moreover, it would be interesting to further investigate the specificity of a generative common purpose. If it seems to be salient in the field of social entrepreneurship, this notion might as well be a strong asset to revisit the adhesion and cohesion mechanisms during innovation process within established companies that carry out a social prospect.

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