

# Youth as social changemakers

Anindita won global recognition for her innovative startup that addresses the sanitation crisis in slums of Dhaka. Its potential to impact the sanitation crisis in cities of developing nations was unmatched. Unlike many competition winners that we see, her project not only looked good on paper, but she pursued it too. For two years she searched for support to launch the venture. Despite her empathy, passion and commitment, she was unable to develop her idea.



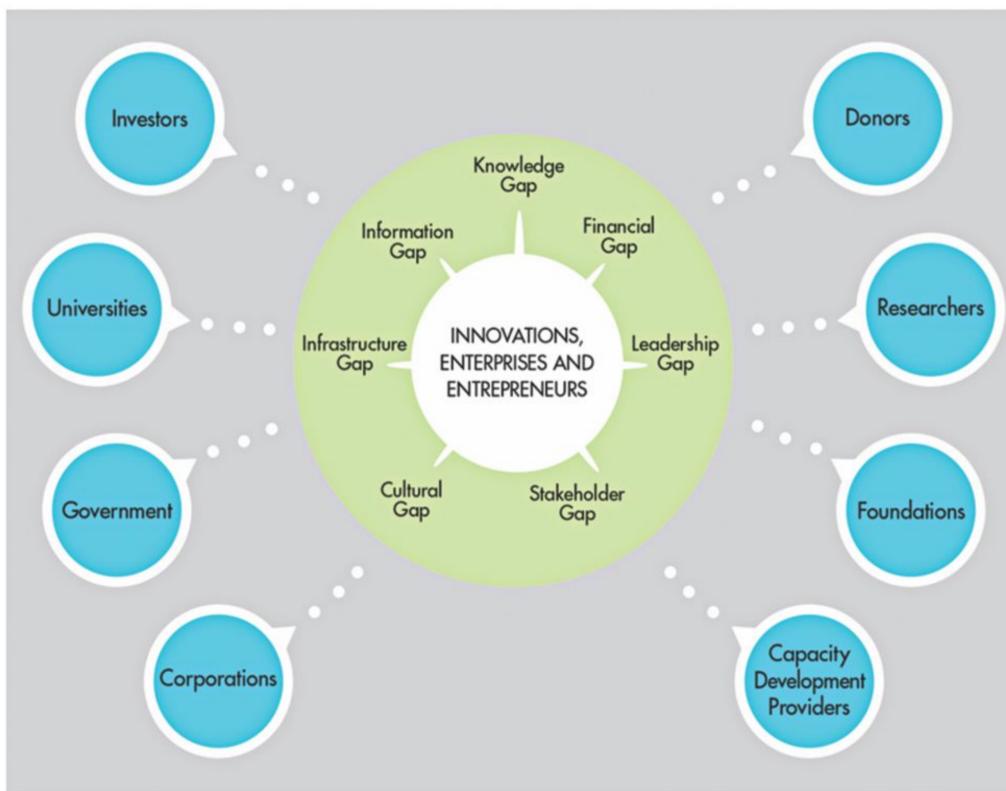
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"A large donor office once told me that these (innovations) are for Western universities to build, we are here to only implement solutions," said Anindita. "There's no future here, I can't pursue it," she added with a sigh. Anindita possessed the potential to create social impact. Her innovative solution to a persistent social problem

changing the way the urban poor deal with sanitation problems.

Anindita's story of promise, potential and failure represents the reality thousands of young innovators face in Bangladesh. They can solve problems and inspire change but fail to access necessary resources, knowledge or mentorship to translate their abilities into actions. Their ideas win competitions and make news headlines, but

Stage of Enterprise	Idea	Pre Product	Pre Revenue	Pre Scale	Scale
Support Enterprise needs	Number of Competitions & awards exists	Incubation			Acceleration
What Toru supports	Framing mindset				
		Design & Innovation	Market readiness	Business Incubation	Investment Readiness
		Personal Development			



SOURCE: TORU

The world does not operate like an ideal Silicon Valley, where ideas are able to launch as soon as they are conceptualised. Moreover, there is a growing tendency of importing solutions and models from abroad, "copied and pasted" without adjustment to the local context. Such practices often end up wasting valuable funding which could be channelled in meaningful interventions.

could serve millions of people, locally and globally. Her talent, technical skills and business acumen were at par with her global competitors. The crucial difference was the access to opportunities and resources.

While her competitors abroad went on to turn their ideas into reality with the support of programmes and global platforms in the West, Anindita's idea faded. If she had been able to access appropriate support and guidance, her innovation would have found ways to scale and reach millions of people,

rarely go beyond that. Lack of resources and support compel them to give up the path of social entrepreneurship even before starting the journey. They accept that entrepreneurship is not a future they are privileged to pursue in Bangladesh.

**Where do ideas go to die?** Many would argue that a person who has the 'right' attitude and skills to start a business or create an innovation, will 'figure out' the way to scale his or her idea. After all, giant companies and organisations around us were not born inside "incubators".

But let us first clarify what is entrepreneurship and what is business. Entrepreneurs work with innovation and take greater risk of trying new things, while business-people replicate existing models to scale. While there is no standard checklist to differentiate ideas, it is wrong to interchange those two words.

Innovative ideas need greater nurturing at various stages in order to be translated into a take-to-market product. We need to recognise the challenges of the ecosystem and adapt. There needs to be an enabling support system and culture for entrepreneurship to flourish. The current startup mania has generated unsustainable practices: speedy fund disbursement, hackathons, competitions without any clear support plans for later stages, and 'accelerator' projects that lack accountability and growth. The popular attitude that revolves around these practices is that entrepreneurs need to kick start their ideas as soon as possible. Current programmes focus on building quick products over allowing for a long-term, holistic development of solutions.

What is left behind the trends and cultural fads are crucial realities: most accelerator programmes take entrepreneurs through workshops and hand-

outs without in-depth support; pitch sessions provide tricks and tips too early in the game and the short tenure of these programmes mean entrepreneurs miss out crucial aspects of developing their ideas.

Since 2015, Toru studied 45 innovations that won various global recognitions. 33 of them failed to move



beyond the idea phase. The 12 innovations that succeeded in building social enterprises shared a common characteristic—they all had access to supportive ecosystems that incubated their innovations and provided crucial support. In the space between aspiring ideas,

fast-paced accelerators and demanding funders, is the ecosystem vacuum where all ideas die a premature death. Toru has identified a stage between ideation and acceleration where ideas fade away due to a lack of infrastructure and support potential. All the competitions take place for either the 'idea' or 'scale' phase. The particular stage, marked with red, is what can be called the "Triangle of Death", where most of the ideas die before execution.

Ideas or innovations, no matter how well-executed, will always be at the risk of failing in the murky terrains of early-stage growth. Unfortunately, support from the local ecosystem is absent in the space of incubation, where it is most crucial.

Since independence, Bangladesh has given the world groundbreaking innovations such as the Oral Rehydration Solution, microcredit, and organisations like NewsCred; some other adaptive innovations have garnered success as well. However, the patience to build an innovation and the support system to develop it don't exist, despite being the prerequisites to solve local problems through local means. The world does not operate like an ideal Silicon Valley, where ideas are able to launch as soon as they are conceptualised. Moreover, there is a growing tendency of importing solutions and models from abroad, "copied and pasted" without adjustment to the local context. Such practices often end up wasting valuable funding which could be channelled in meaningful interventions.

Due to a systemic failure, our pool of talented local youth is unaware of the existing resources. This gives rise to a sense of insecurity and uncertainty regarding social entrepreneurship.

Hence, the uphill climb towards social innovation or entrepreneurship in Bangladesh turns young innovators into lone

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tive young minds to pursue their dreams and ensure that the flame inside them doesn't die? The answer lies in understanding the ecosystem and identifying why we have not been able to build innovative enterprises.

**The potholed ecosystem** The ecosystem in Bangladesh exists in a state of fragmentation. Through our research, we identified the following as gaps in the local entrepreneurial ecosystem. The challenges are deep-rooted in the system and we need to address these at both the micro and macro level.

- **Knowledge gap:** The education system is not built on greater analytical processes, multidisciplinary thinking and creative methods of problem solving. It often makes us solution makers over problem solvers. Furthermore, potential innovators often lack technical expertise, knowledge of product development, a multidisciplinary business approach, etc. There is a lack of systems thinking and no one is able to answer: "What problem you are solving?"
- **Information gap:** A lack of access to information at market access levels and a lack of linkage between academia and industry. An absence of immersion into the problems faced by communities, resulting in unrealistic innovations.
- **Infrastructure gap:** The absence of an integrated support system stems from the lack of incubation and the lack of coordination between stakeholders in the ecosystem.
- **Financial gap:** There is no financial support for testing ideas (early stage grants) and negligible access to seed, angel, and other investment support.