

Opportunity Knocks

On October 17, Beyond Profit is traveling to Mexico for the Opportunity Collaboration, a first-of-its-kind convention of poverty alleviation leaders. The brainchild of Jonathan Lewis, Founder and Chair of Microcredit Enterprises, the Collaboration will bring together 250 delegates for five days—to create new solutions and forge new working relationships. Beyond Profit Managing Editor, Lindsay Clinton, asked Jonathan to tell us more about this unconventional meeting of the minds.

Photo Credit: Timou Bao

At the Opportunity Collaboration, attendees will create fresh partnerships and new plans to improve our world.

Beyond Profit (BP): How did the idea of the Opportunity Collaboration come about?

Jonathan Lewis: The genesis for the Opportunity Collaboration was a growing concern that the poverty eradication movement is becoming increasingly stuck in silos—the silos of education, health, water, microfinance, and so on, and the silos of entrepreneurs vs. nonprofits, governments vs. foundations, funders vs. grantees, etc. The lines of communication between these groups are anemic and, thus, the chance for creative solutions are strangled. The poor live and suffer under multidisciplinary burdens, and we need multidisciplinary solutions.

In this financial crisis, we need to work smarter, faster, more efficiently, and less ideologically. The Opportunity Collaboration is a business meeting to bring together poverty alleviation leaders who are doers, not talkers.

BP: How are the attendees going to move past talk?

Lewis: The Opportunity Collaboration is a working meeting. We have created a structured platform for organizational leaders so that they can have extended, important conversations about working together, developing plans, and ultimately sealing the deal while at the Collaboration. In the end, we are building working relationships that will build better results.

BP: How is this model different from other conferences?

Lewis: No plenary speeches. No panels. No PowerPoints. The architecture of the meeting has three core elements: one, a sophisticated executive education program based on core values

to re-energize the delegates and re-ignite their common commitment and shared values; two, every delegate is invited to present a workshop on their entrepreneurial venture, or their policy or investment idea, and to ask every other delegate how they can work together and form a collaboration; and three, we are prearranging private, one-on-one business discussions, so that delegates can connect and get to work immediately.

BP: What do you hope will come of the first Opportunity Collaboration?

Lewis: We're hoping to foster a number of high-energy, firm commitments or partnerships across sectoral lines, across institutional lines, across any of the divisions that stop organizations from working to their maximum potential. There is no overarching expectation—we're not writing another report, issuing a policy statement, or starting a new initiative. Our aim is specific, granular working relationships that serve the poor.

The Opportunity Collaboration is a social venture in its own right. We have already discovered that the event is financially sustainable without outside underwriting. Now, we will learn if the event itself can meet its social objectives, which are, plain and simple, to improve the impact, scope, and reach of the participating delegates.

BP: Who is attending? Who should we look out for?

Lewis: The point of the meeting is to bring people from across a wide spectrum of perspectives. For example, government representatives, small foundations, large foundations, so-

cial investors, social philanthropists, secular leaders and faith-based leaders alike, smaller programs and larger scale projects, nonprofits and for-profits, all will be present. Geographically, there will be representation from every continent in the world (except Antarctica!).

What is important is the diversity. There is wisdom in the democratic crowd—the group will create a different kind of energy, and, more vitally, the event will be fully participatory, avoiding the staid and stale formality of a traditional conference.

Henry David Thoreau said, “It takes two to speak the truth: one to speak and one to listen.” Every delegate is expected to be a presenter, sharing their entrepreneurial vision on how to change the face of poverty. At other times, every delegate is expected to be a good listener, helping other delegates achieve their organizational mission.

BP: What programming or topics will be covered during the Collaboration?

Lewis: At least 152 distinct business and policy workshops will be presented. It’s hard to think of a topic we’re not covering. Water. Healthcare. Sustainable schools. Metrics and how to measure success. Social investors and philanthropists talking about evaluating a proposal. Political change and policy. The list is endless and reflects the urgent need to find better ways, better solutions.

We’re looking for the poverty eradication equivalent of fusion cooking. The dynamic for most leaders in this space is they have a program—either a social

investment or philanthropic initiative in which they deeply believe and fight for, convincing and persuading others to join their cause and advance their mission. We’re asking the delegates to remain rooted in their vision, but also to support what others are doing, to remain open to working together in a more potent, practical, and profitable way.

BP: I experienced sticker shock when I first found out about the price to attend. It costs nearly US\$5000. Wouldn’t that money be better spent on actually helping people instead of talking about helping people?

Lewis: This is a serious meeting for and by delegates about social change. It’s a different funding model for events and a different level of commitment. The Opportunity Collaboration is not a conference. It’s a business retreat over a weekend that lasts five days. The price includes all expenses, so no participant has to deal with the extra, hidden expenses associated with a typical conference.

In order to ensure a diversity of perspectives, we provided a large number of scholarships and fellowships. About a third of the people attending are sponsored—Beyond Profit is one of these.

And, there is no underwriting. This is a market-driven event. We built it to be sustainable, and it is. The reason other conferences are more affordable is that they are subsidized by corporate or foundation underwriting.

If the Opportunity Collaboration morphs

into an event where attendees are, as you suggest, merely talking about helping people, then it will be canceled. We don’t need another conference where the disgrace of poverty is decried or the audience is complimented for its good deeds.

BP: Will there be another Opportunity Collaboration next year? What is your vision?

Lewis: Whether there is a 2010 Opportunity Collaboration or not will depend on the business deliverables the delegates achieve on-site. If they achieve real results, we will do the Collaboration again, and if they don’t, we won’t plan another one. This is an experiment to see if we can concretely improve the impact of the participating organizations. The only worthy metric is ending the scourge of poverty.

BP: When you’re not organizing large-scale Collaborative retreats, what do you do?

Lewis: I am retired and do this work pro-bono. I am also the Founder and Chair of the board of Microcredit Enterprises, which is a microfinance funder providing debt capital to MFIs in 15 countries on four continents. I’m also on a quest to enjoy the tastiest, most interesting hot dog in the world.

BP: And where would that be?

Lewis: Santiago—Chile’s completo is a terrific hot dog. In the US, I’m partial to a hot dog in Boston served at Speed’s Hot Dog Wagon. And, for the best drive-in experience, Super Dawg in Chicago.