

SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

What Nonprofits Can Learn from the Apollo Program

by [Dan Pallotta](#)

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“Scale” is the new buzzword on the frontier of social sector thinking. Everyone wants to “take organizations to scale.” What does this mean? Getting an organization to the point where it can sustain itself?

This isn't what scale means to me. Something like 400,000 Americans are chronically homeless. Some 800 million people are malnourished in the world. More than 2 million adults and children die of AIDS each year. Until we've created responses as large as that need, we haven't reached scale. What good is it to have a bunch of nonprofits that are able to sustain themselves, if they are only large enough to address .001% of the problem? If “scale” as currently defined represents the apogee of our aspirations, then we have a big problem with our aspirations.

It does, and we do.

Nonprofit organizations have to join forces and begin committing themselves to impossible goals that address the massive social problems we confront, and they must define those goals in time and space — a cure for MS in 10 years; the end of homelessness in Boston in 10 years, and so on. Think of President Kennedy's

challenge: “I believe this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth.” No wiggle room there.

Context is everything, and changing the context changes everything. When Kennedy issued that challenge, no American had even orbited the earth. In fact, the U.S. had sent the first American into space only 20 days earlier. But Kennedy’s challenge changed the context. Experts said the goal was impossible to meet. They’d never said anything like that before because no one had ever provoked them to. And once they said that it was impossible, they had to explain why. In explaining why, they began framing previously unspoken technical problems. That gave birth to a catalogue of all the obstacles that would have to be overcome in order to get a man on the moon and back to the earth within eight years. A blueprint for achieving the impossible emerged out of the sheer audacity of the context. In the absence of the challenge, we’d still be dreaming. Note that, in the absence of any similar challenge today, “experts” say it will take us 20 years to get back to the moon.

Nearly 100 new nonprofits are created in the U.S. every day — about 35,000 a year — most of them doing the same things as existing organizations wrestling with the same social problems. Over 90% are very small — with less than half a million dollars in annual revenues. In his recent article in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, Mark Kramer wrote that, because of fragmentation, redundancy, and the plethora of small organizations “there is little reason to assume that [nonprofits] have the ability to solve society’s large-scale problems.” I would argue that it is precisely because we aren’t committing ourselves to solving society’s large-scale problems that we have fragmentation and redundancy.

In the absence of any compelling context what's the motivation to avoid redundancy? Efficiency? That's not going to make the hair on anyone's arms stand up. We wonder why we can't get nonprofits to merge. Why should they? What purpose would it serve beyond efficiency? And who's going to give up their job security for efficiency?

But if brave organizations would plant a flag for the eradication of AIDS by 2019, things would begin to change. If a courageous group of nonprofits would call for the end of child hunger in D.C. within seven years, we'd have to start talking seriously about consolidation (and all of the other structural problems like admin:program ratios, inadequate investment in infrastructure, and so on) and those discussions would actually be exciting. There would be a reason to reframe the present structure. To try to reframe that structure in the absence of a compelling context (a) lacks any moral authority and (b) is backwards. It's like trying to develop a lunar module in the absence of any goal to get to the moon. You wouldn't know anything about the booster that would carry it, the rendezvous strategy, weight limits, etc. Everything you did would be ineffective.

Organizations that approach some meaningful fraction of the size of our problems and this is what we should mean by scale. Daring goals, set in time and space and they are the only way to get there. Any less courageous path lands us exactly in the chaotic and ineffectual place we stand today. And that's a long way from the moon.

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