



Dr. Taddy Blecher

A South African social entrepreneur turns a new economic vision into practice

By Barbara Nussbaum and Alexander Schieffer

Dr. Taddy Blecher of Johannesburg, South Africa has developed a new model for business education.

Six years ago his CIDA City Campus had shoestring funding and a few students. Now it has four buildings, 1,500 enrollees in its business programs, and is serving as a model for tertiary education in the Developing World.

The foundation of his work rests not only on corporate partnerships, but also on the South African concept of ubuntu, which refers to giving or sharing. Ubuntu is not at all like charity because its model is not restricted to the rich giving down to the poor.

In this spirit, by sharing his charismatic enthusiasm and talent with his homeland, he is enabling many impoverished but talented students to succeed when heretofore they would have lived out hopeless lives.





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Taddy Blecher's dream has been to radically alter the business of business education so that disadvantaged students become entrepreneurs and active partners in a growing economy. He has found a way to engage companies in an interdependent and creative web of innovative partnerships, so that students who, under the prevailing circumstances never would have access to tertiary education, could attend a business school. In South Africa Taddy has invented new forms of corporate responsibility that enrich companies and students in tangible and intangible ways as well. The hearts and lives of many have been profoundly changed.

This university offers a four-year Bachelor of Business Administration degree that emphasizes entrepreneurship, business science, and technology. But it goes much further, focusing on holistic skills development critical to the world of work. Creativity, self-confidence, stress reduction, and meditation are taught alongside marketing, strategy and corporate finance.

At 38, Blecher has successfully turned his vision into a highly successful reality. What underpins Taddy's driving philosophy?

"If you recognize the interconnectedness of all people within an economy, if you start caring for the people to get out of the poverty circle, you ultimately increase the ability for all to create more wealth. It is not by looking only after yourself that you work for the good of everybody; it is by looking after everybody that you ultimately create the basis of wealth for yourself."

In the language of his homeland Taddy's generosity of spirit is called *ubuntu*. Ubuntu is about being so deeply connected to mankind that your identity is defined by what you give to that community. It's about the desire to enhance and enrich others as a pathway to your own personal social, economic and spiritual fulfillment.

The founding of [CIDA \(Community and Individual Development Association\) City Campus](#) by Taddy Blecher and others unfolded a true example of *ubuntu*, presenting a new model of social entrepreneurship, business education and corporate responsibility apt for the 21st century.

Blecher explains:

"I grew up in a Western economic model. This approach has created a few wealthy nations in this world, and it has led to a situation where there are a relatively small number of very wealthy people. However, it has left the majority of the people in the world extremely poor. This model creates a few winners and an enormous number of "losers." Just consider that there are still about four billion people living in poverty. That is not really a successful formula for the evolution of the human race.

"My father always taught me that there is always only one winner. So it was not good enough to be the second-best in school, one had to be the best. However, your own winning depended on other people losing. Then I went to university and studied economics. The first thing that came out of the lecturer's mouth was that economic principles are about fighting for the allocation of scarce resources. Only the best would gain access to those re-



sources, only the fittest could survive. So all the traditional economic theories supported the win/lose perspective.

"However, I found out that there are a few things that the economic theories did not factor in. While certain resources certainly are limited, the human brain and the possibilities it can create are infinite. And humans' creativity is infinite. Humans went to the moon, human minds invented Microsoft and the Internet, connecting the whole world and making former ways of communicating messages obsolete.

"So, for example, the scarcity of wood for building ships to transport information through paper envelopes is not relevant anymore, as humans have developed new ways to communicate across the ocean with the help of their engineering skills. This metaphor applies to many other areas. The world is in co-existence with the so-called scarce resources on the one hand and infinite resources on the other hand. So, as there are surely limited and scarce resources, the one thing that had to be developed further is the human mind, as it is in our own individual and collective imagination that the potential for endless creativity and boundless options reside.

"I realized that the dominating theory of scarce resources has led to the win/lose logic, which also created apartheid in South Africa. It was the belief that there is not enough for everyone and that therefore the black people had to be excluded from the wealth of this country."

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Taddy's and CIDA's success have been recognized both in South Africa and internationally. In 2002 Taddy was selected by the World Economic Forum as a Global Leader of Tomorrow. Three years after, the same organization selected him to serve as one of 234 Young Global Leaders who are internationally prominent and share a commitment to shaping the global future.

In fact, CIDA is fast becoming a hub for academics all over the world. Professors visiting from Harvard, Berkeley, MIT, Cambridge, the London School of Economics, and Rutgers are examples of many who have come to research and understand CIDA's unique and highly effective educational model. Oprah Winfrey has visited and donated over \$1 million to build a new student residence. Other well-known leaders and celebrities, including the Dalai Lama, Richard Branson, Tom Peters, Suze Orman, Edward de Bono, and the Lord Mayor of the City of London have visited the campus.

CIDA City Campus – how it all started

CIDA City Campus is a place where the poorest of the poor can receive a tertiary level business education at a fraction of what it costs elsewhere. Noticing the many barriers to entry to business schools, which still recruit mostly financially privileged white South Africans, Taddy and his colleagues felt inspired to start CIDA six years ago.

He says, "A key question for me was, 'How can we take society to a higher level on a big scale?' Look at the key problems in African countries: the economy is not growing fast enough. There is unemployment, poverty, lack of engagement, lack of creativity, lack of entrepreneurship, corruption, crime, AIDS, etc. Many of these problems are linked, and ultimately I see them all as human



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"Take the problem of crime: we are installing all kinds of camera systems to spot criminals; we have huge police forces in South Africa. All these are reactive solutions to crime. If society could manage to develop a more pro-active solution to crime, we could start seeing the human dimensions behind crime and then find a human solution on a deep level – that could make a real difference."

The campus enrolled its first students in 1999 in an old building in the heart of Johannesburg's central district. When many of her friends thought that Taddy was overly idealistic, Barbara Nussbaum, one of the co-authors of this article, spent six months of her career with him, earning a modest salary, because she believed in Taddy's dream and worked with him when CIDA was nothing more than a concept on paper.

"I recall spending a few days driving around Johannesburg with Taddy during 1998, when many businesses with beautiful buildings in the city centre were simply abandoning their offices to escape the effects of rising crime. One after another, companies were moving their staff to safer locations in the suburbs. Taddy had his heart set on a particular building owned by Anglo American, on Johannesburg's West Street. We tried hard to buy the building at a low price, or to rent the building, but at that stage, CIDA had neither the credibility nor the track record to merit successful negotiation of such terms. Taddy never gave up or lost hope."

CIDA now owns four buildings, all of which have been donated by companies. Anglo American eventually donated to CIDA the West Street building that Taddy so desired.

In 1998, a year before CIDA began in downtown Johannesburg, South Africa had the highest recorded per capita murder rate of the countries selected in the Interpol report. According to Interpol, in 1998 there were 59 recorded murders in South Africa per 100,000 of the population, followed by Colombia with 56. By contrast in Spain there were three murders per 100,000 and in Canada four murders per 100,000. (Source, Interpol 1998, CIAC)

CIDA began humbly, hosting 250 first-year students in a rundown building that formerly sheltered a small teaching college. By the end of the first year, CIDA and Taddy had gained the confidence of companies willing to provide significant support. Investec, a South African bank now listed on the London stock exchange, agreed to donate the use of their former head office to CIDA for free. Investec also paid the full cost of all renovations to create large rooms for lectures. They paid for other conversions, which would transform a traditional office building into an educational setting. To their delight, students found their environment and their world completely changed. Instead of walking on old floors with shabby carpets, students were surrounded by lobbies built of Italian white marble and scenic views of the city from a beautiful sunroof garden.



Today's CIDA

CIDA now has 1,500 students on scholarships worth R60 million. It provides an affordable alternative to high-level tertiary education at a fraction of the cost of a conventional business degree. Fees for registration, tuition and books are R350 (less than \$50 US) in the first year and then R150 a month for the next three years of study. Students also need to find about R 300 a month for accommodation and about R 250 for food.

Costs are kept down in several ways. Corporate sponsors provide financial support for student scholarships. All students have a work-study job in the university, donating their time to running the campus to keep overhead low. So students run the admissions office, work in the library, act as janitors and audiovisual technicians. Technology enables lecturers to reach students in more than one classroom through state of the art video equipment. Then instead of carrying a large overhead for faculty salaries, corporations provide many of the lecturers themselves. So students receive lectures from industry professionals, rather than simply learning textbook theories. Curricula fulfill accreditation requirements for a degree (Bachelor of Business Administration) which has been accepted by the South African government's education department. 2004 saw CIDA's first graduation ceremony.

What is inspiring about Taddy Blecher is his vision of a model for a new society and a completely different economic paradigm that values the triple bottom line and service. "Giving" is more important than simple profit. Many of the principles in Taddy's thinking resonate with the philosophy of *ubuntu*, which is about building relationships and releasing the potential for generating, creating and sharing wealth.

Blecher says, "CIDA embodies a new economic paradigm. Our university focuses on providing world-class business education. Why business? Because business is one of the dominant wealth-creating institutions in society. So we are developing entrepreneurs, people who can start new initiatives, be it in banking, in trading, in education of their own communities or whatever. I believe that CIDA can play an important role in the transformation of South African society and economy by developing top students who can reach out all over the country, teaching people things like: how to manage their businesses, how to finance an investment, how to do the accounting etc. By doing this we have reached by now already over a million people in the country. And this is really a kind of revolution we initiated with CIDA."

Incentives for Corporate Partners

Why do businesses partner with CIDA? What is "in it" for them"?

Taddy has a gift for brokering creative win/win partnerships. For example, under one formula the education of CIDA students serves to benefit donor partners. For First National Bank (FNB), students not only work in paid internships year after year during their university terms, but they also become advisors and marketing agents in outlying rural areas so that the banks can expand and create markets and services which truly meet the needs of rural consumers.

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Another benefit of the partnership of CIDA and FNB is that children of the bank's less privileged employees are offered scholarships to CIDA. Taddy weaves a network of creative relationships and transforms lives for people who would, under normal circumstances, never set foot in a business school. Many times, he says, he has been inspired by a German proverb, "Weave and the thread will follow." So often, the power of his optimistic determination and problem-solving capacity has yielded unimaginable results.

During the first year CIDA simply had no computers for the students. Undaunted, Taddy xeroxed 250 copies of the computer keyboard and a monitor for each student. They learned how to type to the rhythms of Bob Marley's *Redemption Song*: "Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our minds." Several months later, when companies eventually started donating older computers, most the students had mastered a typing speed above 30 words a minute.

Five years later, 84 students graduated, equating to a third of those enrolled. Of these 45 found jobs in the business sector, 19 are continuing their studies at other institutions, and 10 students have been hired by CIDA. DaimlerChrysler, one of CIDA's corporate sponsors, hired four graduates. All came from poor rural areas, or urban townships, or squatter camps. Graduation rates in South African universities are now quoted as regularly ranging between 15% and 25 percent. By comparison, even with all the challenges of the first year -- students leaving because of the poor building facilities, lack of student accommodation and adequate mentorship -- CIDA exceeded national averages. Taddy Blecher predicts that for the coming year the dropout rate will fall below 10 percent.

In post-apartheid South Africa, all companies face the challenge of meeting employment equity requirements and retaining a skilled and loyal workforce. Edgars, South Africa's version of Macy's, hires student interns for weekend work. At the end of three years, Edgars is given first choice to hire from the pool of graduating students. During this time, the student has had ample opportunity to experience different kinds of jobs within the Edgars' vast chain of stores. The company has had an unusual window of opportunity to groom, supervise, and gain the loyalty of a young and talented group of graduates. Everybody's success becomes everyone else's success. This is *ubuntu* finding practical expression in business. It is by living this formula that we see the building blocks intrinsic to CIDA's success. Taddy Blecher's dream is to grow the CIDA campus in Johannesburg and then to replicate CIDA's model in other provinces. This year the Cape Town branch of CIDA is up and running with its first intake of students.

Corporate Reactions

Taddy is an exemplar of *ubuntu* and an unusual entrepreneur in many ways. He finds greater personal meaning in working with CIDA, with minimal financial reward, deciding to give up an opportunity to earn a substantial salary as a senior strategy consultant for the Monitor Group, a prestigious international strategic consulting firm headquartered in Boston.

True to its reputation as "a great place for optimists who try to change the



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world," it was Monitor South Africa that gave Taddy sponsorship support in CIDA's earliest days. When Taddy submitted his resignation, they invited him to keep his office and work for Monitor for five hours a week, leaving him free to work on his dream the rest of the time. When CIDA owned neither an address nor fax machine, it was Monitor's fax machines that became jammed on a daily basis, with thousands of applications for CIDA from graduating high school students. It was Monitor that provided some of the first scholarships for CIDA students and access to its clients so that other partnerships could be forged.

With the support of "Monitor's Optimists" and fellow CIDA co-founders, Taddy celebrates a life vibrant with imagination and passion, inspiring others to engage in a new, more holistic form of corporate responsibility. An actuarial science major, he blends attention to quantitative financial models with a huge heart. Many who become involved with CIDA just want to be generous. Not only has he created meaning in his own life and those of his students, but Taddy has found a way to work with corporate partners in a way that enables them to find meaning in contributing to the larger community through sharing knowledge, wealth and resources with others in a network of win-win relationships.

Wolfgang Jakob of the South African branch of the German-owned company [T-Systems](#) spoke at the launch of CIDA's world-class ICT Academy ("Information and Communications Technology") in 2003. His company spearheaded a consortium of 12 other companies that came together to sponsor an academy designed to address the skills shortage in the ICT sector. "Taddy got into my heart. How could I not become involved?"

The *ubuntu* concept is, of course, a South African term. The nation has the [highest crime rate in the world](#) and not surprisingly, the poorest 20 percent of the population represent 3 percent of consumption. Foreign aid amounts to less than half a percent of GDP, but foreign debt service extracts almost 12 percent. In this context, the concept of "giving" seems particularly apposite.

Teddy remarks:

"The question is: can't there be an alternative way of thinking that allows many more people access to wealth? I am not talking about communism, but I am talking about flowing knowledge and about unleashing creativity that form the basis for wealth creation. Why fight for a share of a cake that cannot grow beyond a finite size? Instead, why not give the entire cake a chance to grow so that everyone could get a share of it without most of the people having no access to the cake at all? The more people have a chance to create wealth for themselves, the more the entire cake grows, which is ultimately beneficial for all.

"If the poor stay poor, they can't buy anything. Instead, the more poverty there is, the more crime, the more the few wealthy have to protect their wealth against the huge number of poor people. So what is the result? Instead of investing in useful things, the wealthy have to spend a great amount of money in protection as well as security services and technologies, not to mention the tension of constantly living with the fear of being

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robbed, mugged or murdered.

"Seeing this bigger picture was a major shift in my understanding of how the economy works. It also showed me that in an economy we are all very much interlinked. We rely on each other, whether we want it or not. My wealth depends on the ability of other people to purchase my goods. So we have to understand ourselves as an interconnected system. That means that by leaving worldwide four billion poor people in the street, we destroy most of the potential economic wealth that could exist in this world."

A life filled with *ubuntu* values is about enhancing and enriching the development of others, as a pathway to one's own personal social, economic and spiritual fulfillment. Taddy's life and his teachings give us a glimpse of how ubuntu can be made practical.

"We are trying to implant this mind shift, all this new thinking into the student body, so that they can replicate us in their own towns, their own cities, in the whole country. They can take the CIDA philosophy and apply it to a farm, to an IT company, to a branch of CIDA, to a school. Part of our philosophy at CIDA is that "it takes a child to raise a village." All students go back to their communities and share their own learning with their communities. They choose an area of passion or interest. For some, it is about teaching their high school principals about financial management; for others it is about AIDS education for the youth. For others it is about helping small businesspeople with a more ambitious marketing plan.

"We started to realize what a new society, what an exciting business world, what an exciting academic world we can create.

"If you use this model and extend it to society, you could easily have a society free of poverty.

"Then we would not need hundreds of millions of dollars from the IMF and World Bank, for such a system would be self-generating, self-sufficient, and self-sustaining. And that is exactly how nature works. Everyone does what he or she is best in and offers that to the society. CIDA is a wonderful experiment to reconnect to this natural order in life."

"Imagine what the world could be if more entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurs took to heart this young man's wisdom?

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About the Authors:

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