

# Ashoka's Role in Maximizing the Impact of the Social Entrepreneurs Elected as Ashoka Fellows

Alessandro Valera 30 November 2018

Founded in 1980, Ashoka has become the largest global network of social entrepreneurs, now encompassing almost 3,600 Fellows elected in 92 countries. While other organizations have focused on social entrepreneurs as leaders of social enterprises or social businesses, Ashoka realized early on that what characterized social entrepreneurs was not so much their ability to generate revenue from their activities, but rather their ability and desire to think big, to include diverse partners in the solution, and to successfully change systems for the benefit of all, not just those directly touched by their work. While Ashoka has tracked Fellows' ability to influence systems change for more than 20 years (both in terms of changes in policy and laws as well as changes in market dynamics), in 2018 Ashoka began to collect data to investigate whether and how it has had a role in accelerating the impact of its Fellows' ideas. Therefore in the Global Fellows Survey we added questions to measure the impact that Fellows attribute to Ashoka, in addition to 43 qualitative interviews where we delved deeper into our

findings from the survey.

The personal stipend that Ashoka gives to most Fellows emerged from the surveys and interviews as one of the most important benefits of entry into the Fellowship -- what we have named the mutual support network of our social entrepreneurs globally. The stipend is meant to help the social entrepreneur focus full-time on their social mission without the need to work elsewhere to maintain themselves or their families. We asked respondents who did receive a stipend whether it had been the first significant source of funding for their ideas. The responses were equally split between those saying that it was (50 percent) and that it wasn't (50 percent). There were however significant variations by geography. The stipend had been the most significant source of funding for 62 percent of Fellows operating in Latin America, for 56 percent of Fellows active in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Asia, and for 54 percent of Fellows in Africa. These results may reflect wider availability of funds for Fellows active in Europe and North America. A Latin America fellow tells us about the help of the stipend in the early stage of her venture:

*"Ashoka made it possible to move ahead in a way that didn't create a conflict between my need for income and [my organization's] need to build itself up independently."*

In the Global Fellows Study we explored whether, in addition to being the first significant source of funding,

the stipend had indeed helped Fellows to focus full-time on their idea. Globally, 92 percent of Fellows reported that the stipend helped them focus full-time on their idea. This number went up to 97 percent when it came to Fellows active in Africa, and to 94 percent for those working in MENA.

Based on these results and the interviews, we can conclude that the stipend is a key factor enabling Fellows to both find initial funding and to focus full-time on their idea. Although the survey results showed that the stipend was particularly helpful in non-Western countries, European and North American Fellows in interviews confirmed that the stipend was critical in their context as well:

*"I [couldn't be] any lower to the bottom of the cycle of life the moment that Ashoka called. So, in a real way, it empowered me, it gave me legs to stand on. It proved to me at the time when I was doubting everything I had been doing up to that point that indeed what I was saying was really real and valid. So I don't think you can get more empowered than that. Plus it gave me money to live on during the transition."*

(North American Fellow)

Ashoka's selection process, which typically lasts between six months to one year, is often cited by Fellows as a key learning experience where they were able to think differently about systems change and have the

opportunity to interact with many partners and Fellows in the Ashoka network. When we asked Fellows in the survey whether the selection process had helped them strengthen and articulate their idea, two-thirds of respondents (66 percent) fully agreed with this statement, with more than a quarter (27 percent) agreeing to some extent. The number of those fully agreeing goes up to three-quarters for Africa (75 percent) and MENA (74 percent).

An Indian fellow that took part in the qualitative study exemplifies the impact of the selection process:

*“My fellowship selection took a long time: almost two years! I was able to evolve that strategy towards co-creation. When I was selected in Ashoka we were working in a smaller magnitude within villages. Through the Ashoka selection, the scaling strategy was defined, and we understood that most important factors were interfacing the technology, gender integration with the technology, involving ourselves in open-source technology, and to create open inclusive process of all technical institutes [working with us] that dramatically changed our model.”*

It is perhaps worth explaining the nature of the selection process of Ashoka, which may help to explain why it can take years but also why it tends to elect people who end up staying in the field for decades and create long-lasting impact. Ashoka’s Search and Selection process is very

different from a pitch to a jury, but rather a collaborative conversation of ideas. The main goal is to test how candidates solve problems and think about change, not what they think.

Ashoka's 3,600 social entrepreneurs have been selected after considering hundreds of thousands and screening tens of thousands. Ashoka elects fellows at an inflection point, only when there is consensus among all those involved at all five stages of selection. The process begins with a nomination by someone who is part of our network. Ashoka's Venture representatives across the globe consider thousands of nominations a year. Those people that seem to possess new system changing ideas, an entrepreneurial track record, creative problem solving, the potential for significant impact, and unquestionable ethical fiber are approached. There is significant face-to-face, in-depth interviews and site visits by our national teams. The next stage includes an Ashoka board appointed interviewer from another continent, who can evaluate the system change potential beyond national context. Then a panel of peers who know what it takes to create big change also interview and assess candidates against the same criteria as the previous three steps. The final stage is a review by Ashoka's global board.

**The above results are a strong indicator that Ashoka's thorough selection process is in itself an impactful process for the majority of Fellows. For some simply the time with interlocutors who care enough to ask**

**both big and small questions is value itself. For many the stipend is often the first significant source of funding as well as an important factor in Fellows being able to pursue their idea full-time. The selection process and stipend allow the great majority of Fellows to strengthen and articulate their idea and at the same time to focus full-time on the solution of a social problem.**

The Ashoka Fellowship has two unique characteristics compared to its peers within the field of social entrepreneurship. First, we look for social entrepreneurs who both have an entrepreneurial "track record" as well as a systems-changing idea. Second, our stipend is given to fund the Fellow rather than a specific organization or project. By selecting social entrepreneurs who have made the solution of a problem their life's mission, and funding them to focus full-time on their idea, we maximize the chances that they will persist in solving the root of the social problem.

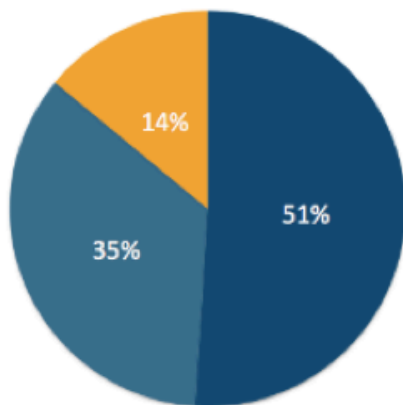
The social entrepreneurs who become Ashoka Fellows are leaders who recognize the need to give up control over their idea to see it spread. They are resilient and adaptive to change; the majority of Fellows practice a type of leadership that is transitional and non-hierarchical. In the interviews, Fellows confirmed that they lead by giving up power rather than consolidating it. Many Fellows voiced the opinion that their mission was to spread their idea so effectively that they themselves would no longer be

necessary to solving the problem.

To understand whether Ashoka had any influence on Fellows' leadership or thinking on systems change, in the survey we asked Fellows whether as a result of Ashoka they had changed how they think about systems change or how they practice leadership. When asked whether Ashoka has helped them see their work at a system change level, 86 percent responded positively. We went on to ask those who saw their work differently whether their strategy had changed as a consequence of this new perspective: 92 percent confirmed they had indeed fully or partly changed their strategy.

**Has Ashoka helped you see your work at a systems-change level?**

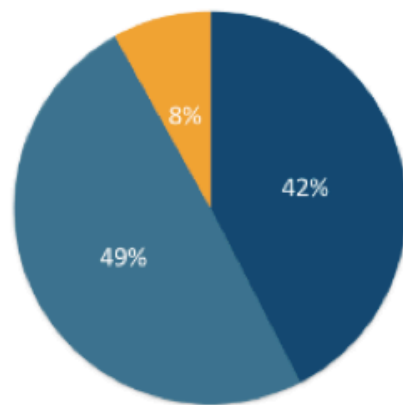
■ Yes (51%) ■ To some extent (35%) ■ No (14%)



N = 818

**As a result, have you made changes to your strategy?**

■ Yes (42%) ■ To some extent (49%) ■ No (8%)



N = 695

*86% report that Ashoka helped them see their work at a systems-change level, and of those Fellows, 92% made changes to their strategy as a result*

A European fellow, interviewed in the qualitative phase of the study, confirms this trend when interviewed:

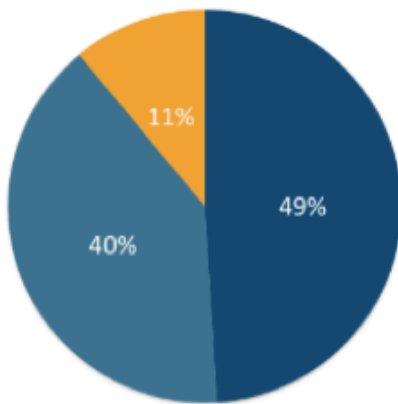
*"My mission has remained the same. I continue working*

*for the wellbeing and integration of refugees. By my strategy has changed significantly. I now focus more on system change. Before [our methodology] was purely project based work (...), whereas right now we still continue to work in projects, but from the very first minute onwards we want to re-define the new role model for integration of refugees in Germany."*

In terms of leadership, 89 percent of Fellows report that Ashoka changed how they see themselves as a leader, and of those Fellows, 94 percent are leading differently as a result.

**Has Ashoka changed how you see yourself as a leader?**

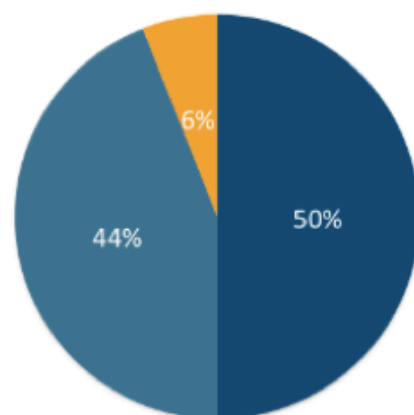
■ Yes (49%) ■ To some extent (40%) ■ No (11%)



N = 815

**As a result, are you leading differently?**

■ Yes (50%) ■ To some extent (44%) ■ No (6%)



N = 716

*89% of Fellows report that Ashoka changed how they see themselves as a leader, and of those Fellows, 94% are leading differently as a result*

This was confirmed in the qualitative study. A Fellow from Africa, for example, reported that:

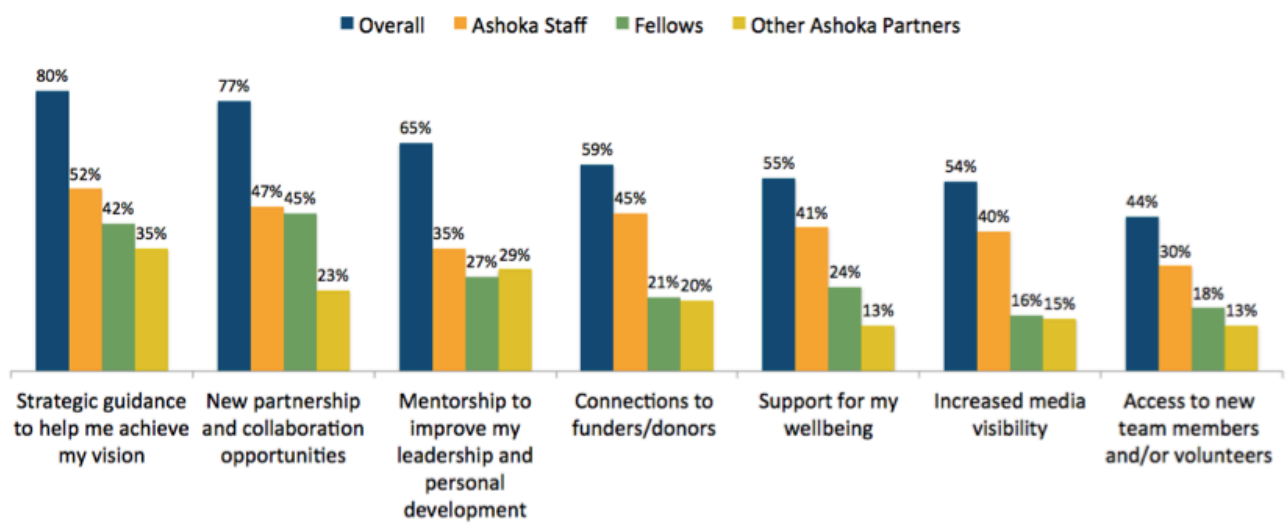
*"Ashoka's Globalizer<sup>1</sup>, as well as working with other Fellows, showed me how to implement systems change.*

*Now my organization is growing, and I am comfortable stepping out of a leadership role to start a new entity and make space for others to lead."*

Fellows were also asked directly whether Ashoka has helped them increase their impact. 84 percent confirmed that Ashoka helped them increase their impact, with seven percent not sure about it, and nine percent who said it didn't.

**Based on the Global Fellows Study results, not only do we now have evidence that Ashoka's selection process strengthens the ideas of its fellows, but that the Ashoka Fellowship contributes significantly to systemic thinking and leadership qualities of its Fellows, with the consequences that many of them change their strategies accordingly. A majority of Fellows confirm that this helped them increase the impact of their work.**

While the Venture process (the search and selection of new Ashoka Fellows) is standardized across the globe, how recently elected and existing Fellows are supported varies greatly depending on the local context of each country, the presence and size of Ashoka staff, as well as the organizations accompanying social entrepreneurs and the maturity of the social entrepreneurship ecosystem. For this reason, we asked social entrepreneurs what kind of help they have received from Ashoka and by which members of this global network.



As visualized in the chart above, the most common type of support is strategic guidance (80 percent) as well as the creation of new partnerships (77 percent). Two-thirds of Fellows mentioned mentorship to improve their leadership (65 percent). More than half claim that Ashoka has created new funding opportunities (59 percent), helped them to focus on their wellbeing (55 percent), or increased their media visibility (54 percent). A South Asian fellow tells us that:

*“Ashoka helped me to connect with the right people who provided mentorship. They connected me with media houses. Ashoka really raised my profile to high-level people. I was able to access international forums on climate-related issues.”*

In each of these subcategories, Ashoka staff tends to be the most significant source of help, followed closely by other Ashoka Fellows. Indeed, Fellows report a structured collaboration or partnership with an average of 4.1 other fellows, with seven percent of them collaborating with 10

or more Fellows. Mentorship and strategic guidance are often delivered by external partners engaged by Ashoka.

A North American fellow exemplifies the role of other fellows in bringing value to their mission:

*"I've met a lot of people through my cohort who are helping me with emotional support but also think about scaling differently."*

While Ashoka has conducted studies of Fellows elected in the previous five and 10 years, the 2018 Global Fellows Study is the first-ever study of all Fellows in the Ashoka network ever elected. Because of the large sample size and the addition of questions on how Ashoka may have accelerated the Fellows' work, we are now able to draw conclusions about Ashoka's impact over time and across geographies.

The data presented in this article gives evidence for the first time that particularly for Fellows active in the Global South, the stipend is the first significant source of funding for their idea. All Fellows in the global network receive mentorship, strategic guidance, connection to funders and media as well as support to their wellbeing. This helps most of them to see the critical social or environmental problem they are trying to tackle in systems change terms and many of them change their strategy accordingly. The guidance received by Ashoka staff, by other Fellows and external allies also contributes to how Fellows perceive

themselves as leaders.

[Our findings strongly indicate](#) that Ashoka has a valuable role in accelerating Fellows' social impact that positively improves policy and market dynamics. We find that Ashoka has been able to bring to the surface ideas that may otherwise have been lost or remained confined locally. Fellows also report that Ashoka plays a role in validating their ideas and work by confirming that they are on the right track. We look forward to conducting more research in the future to gain a more in-depth understanding of Ashoka's impact, and how we accelerate the impact of our Fellows.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> A program offered to Fellows aimed at scaling the impact of their work internationally

## Author bio

**Alessandro Valera** is the Director of Ashoka Italy and co-founder of Ashoka's Impact and Evidence Unit.

Alessandro Valera has studied in Italy, Canada, and the United Kingdom. He holds a MSc in Politics and Communication from the London School of Economics. In the last 10 years he has gathered experience in the field of research, public policy, communication, human rights, and social entrepreneurship. He has worked as a Senior Researcher for EdComs, a UK-based consultancy specialized in research on children and young people's

issues. He has also collaborated with European Alternatives, where he was Director of Policy and Research. He co-founded a research agency, Con-Senso, active in Italy, Spain, France, Germany, and the UK, as well as his own social business Edu-Care, aimed at training teachers and parents on social networks and their responsible use by children and young people. In 2014 he was selected to become the Launch Director of Ashoka Italy. In one year, he gathered the funds, team, and network to start Ashoka Italia. In 2017, he co-created the Ashoka Impact and Evidence Unit to better measure and communicate the impact of Ashoka's work around the world. He is a guest lecturer on the subject of Social Entrepreneurship at Luiss Business School in Rome.