

## **Ashoka's Selection Process and Financial Stipend Create Value Across the Globe**

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### **Abstract**

For 40 years now, Ashoka has selected, connected, and supported leading social entrepreneurs around the world. The community of Ashoka Fellows is nearly 4,000 strong—each of whom is chosen through a rigorous selection process. The vast majority of them receive a three-year financial stipend.

As part of Ashoka's 2021 Global Fellows Study, we wanted to know: what was the selection process experience for our Fellows? Was the financial stipend still helpful? More specifically, was it coming at an especially timely moment, for example, enabling early-stage social entrepreneurs to focus full-time on the development of their ideas? And finally, how did the answers to these questions vary by demographic factors such as geographical location, gender, etc.? Lastly, what lessons should we draw from these variations?

Our survey of 817 Fellows across 81 countries (over 26% of the total population of Ashoka Fellows), together with 32 in-depth interviews, produced a rich data set that underpins our findings. Notably, we learned that a significant majority (91% of respondents) found the selection process valuable in articulating and strengthening their core ideas. We further learned that Ashoka's stipend continues to be catalytic: even in a more mature global social entrepreneurship field compared to when Ashoka started, nearly half of our respondents (47%) told us that the Ashoka stipend was the first significant source of funding for their ideas.

### **Ashoka's selection process is more than a simple evaluation.**

Ashoka's five-stage selection process has remained remarkably consistent over decades. It has successfully emphasized in-depth conversations and peer review to best determine whether an idea is new and potentially transformative. Among the five criteria used to assess candidates for the Ashoka fellowship, two are meant to evaluate the innovative potential of the idea such as new idea and social impact. The other three criteria are related to the person leading this new idea in terms of entrepreneurial quality, creativity, and ethical fiber. In this way, the individual

attributes and personal journey of the candidate going through our selection process matter more than the organization they have set up.<sup>1</sup>

One obvious way of assessing the effectiveness of our selection process is to look at the outcomes, i.e., the Ashoka Fellows that are ultimately selected and the track record of their social impact. Indeed, much of the Global Fellows Study does just this, highlighting that 71% of respondents report to have achieved legislative change at the national level. However, this could simply mean that Ashoka is good at selecting public sector leaders who are just about to shape public policy. We therefore explicitly set to assess whether the selection process was valuable *in and of itself*. In other words: not simply serve as an evaluative tool, but as the beginning of a lifelong relationship between Fellows and Ashoka. We asked Fellows: Did the Ashoka selection process help you strengthen and articulate your idea?

91% said ‘yes’ or ‘to some extent’.

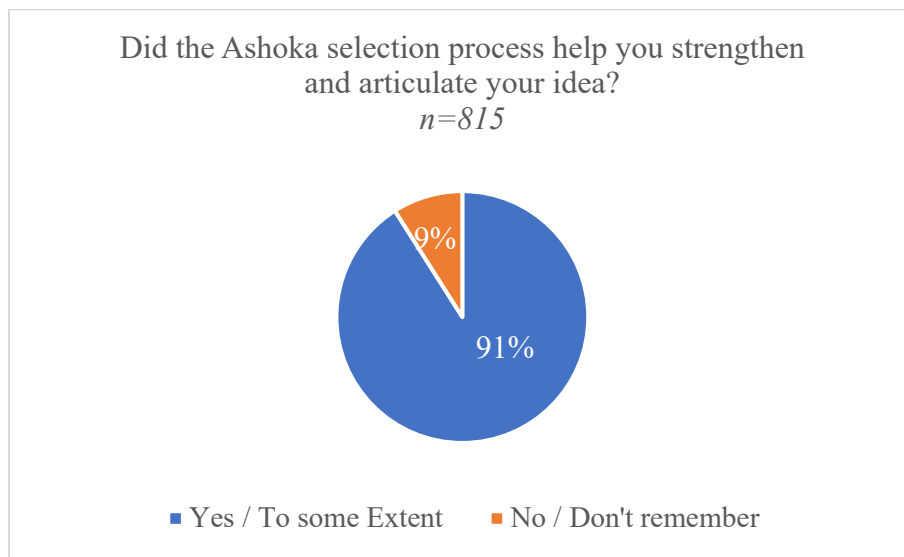


Figure 1: 91% of Fellows reported that the Ashoka process helped them strengthen and articulate their idea.

These results are not surprising, given the design of the selection process. At the core are exploratory conversations. These are often over the span of 9-12 months with up to 10 different people and aims to examine the origins of a candidate’s work, its many dimensions, and the ways it might grow and evolve. These conversations go beyond a one-directional relay of information i.e., “tell us what you are doing”. Instead, they more closely resemble a bi-directional brainstorm i.e., “have you considered this direction?”. Ashoka interviewers regularly play back what they hear from social entrepreneurs in their own words because they must ultimately present cogent materials to the Ashoka board to make the case for a fellowship. That playback—together with

the mutual exploration of directions and possibilities—can be stimulating and clarifying. In many cases, it sharpens the social entrepreneur’s own presentation of their work.

It helps that Ashoka staff, Fellows, and other social or business entrepreneurs form the backbone of the selection team. Many of them have had hundreds of such conversations across fields of work and geographies and lean on these experiences to guide thoughtful discussions. It is not infrequent for interviewers to make referrals or introductions for candidates to, for example, a potential funder while the selection process is ongoing. In this way, the process is already about *advancing* the work of the social entrepreneurs, as opposed to merely evaluating it. Furthermore, Ashoka Fellow candidates are typically invited to selection panels in groups, with dedicated time set aside for them to meet each other and discuss their work. This is yet another opportunity to pressure-test ideas and language.

Finally, it’s worth noting that Ashoka asks different questions from what most foundations and grantmaking organizations ask. For example, emphasizing the systemic implications of a candidate’s work in a decade or more. Candidates and Fellows alike have told us that the Ashoka questions pull them away from their day-to-day view and allow them to be more expansive in their approach. In one instance, a Fellow told us that during an interview, it felt as if Ashoka was inviting her to have a bigger vision than she was allowing herself to imagine until that point.

### **The degree to which Fellows found the selection process valuable varied by geography, gender, minority status, and parental education level.**

In the 2021 study, Fellows from Latin America were the most likely to say the selection process helped them strengthen and articulate their ideas at least to some extent (96%), as compared to 86% in North America. We also found that women were more likely to answer ‘yes’ (69% compared with 62% of men). Also, Fellows belonging to three or more minority groups<sup>2</sup> answered ‘yes 70% of the time, compared with 65% for those belonging to no minority groups.

Finally, Fellows for whom neither parent completed secondary education told us that the process helped them at least to some extent (97%). This is significantly more than for those whose parents had completed secondary education or above (89%), suggesting that social entrepreneurs coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to benefit more from this type of selection process.

When it comes to organizational forms, Fellows with organizations with non-profit or hybrid models appreciate the selection process much more (66% reported that it helped them) than those with for-profit models (49%).

These data suggest that our selection process, standardized across geographies (though always including local interviewers), lands differently across different groups. Our analysis from this study together with conversations over the last decade have led us to believe that our selection process is more helpful in regions of the world where social entrepreneurship as a sector is either

less developed or less professionalized and less well-resourced. In North America, for example, it is not uncommon to speak with candidates who have already been through other fellowship selection processes, or who regularly present their work to philanthropists or journalists. But even in North America, candidates who identify with groups with historically less access to influential networks (including female candidates, minorities, or those with lower education levels) tend to value the Ashoka selection process more – as well as Ashoka’s fellowship offerings.<sup>3</sup>

At a moment when Ashoka is paying close attention to being as inclusive as possible, this data will continue pushing us to explore more ways in which our selection process might be biased toward advancing some candidates and not others because of factors unrelated to the quality of their work. A natural future area of study would be to compare those who were ultimately selected as Fellows with those who were not and better understand why. Some of this work has already begun in the United States, where six years ago the Ashoka team launched its “All America”<sup>4</sup> initiative precisely to de-bias the selection process and ensure that incoming classes of Fellows were more representative of the country<sup>5</sup> as a whole.

**The Ashoka financial stipend remains catalytic, even as the field of social entrepreneurship has matured across the globe.**

Nearly half (47%) of the 644 surveyed Fellows who received a three-year financial stipend from Ashoka reported that it was the first significant source of funding for their ideas. Meanwhile, 80% responded that the stipend helped them focus full-time on their ideas.

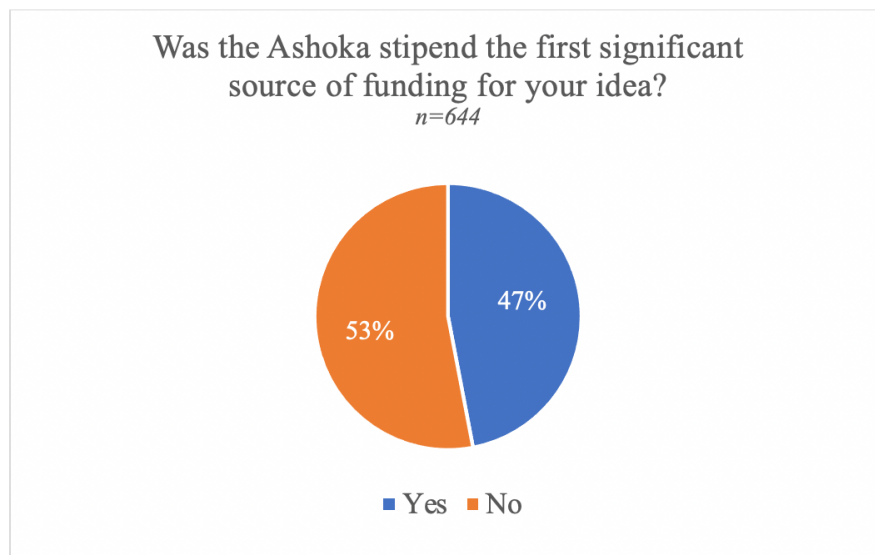


Figure 2: 47% of Fellows reported that the Ashoka stipend was the first significant source of funding for their idea.

On this question there were some larger variations by geography: for example, 61% of Fellows from across Africa reported that the Ashoka stipend was their first significant source of funding, compared with just 25% in North America. Similarly, 59% of Fellows in East Asia answered that the stipend was their first significant funding source, compared with 35% in Europe. Our hypothesis is that this is largely due to regional disparities in available seed funding, the presence of philanthropic organizations, and of other support organizations for social entrepreneurs.

We also see continued evidence of gender disparities in access to funding as well: 52% of female Fellows reported the stipend as their first significant source of funding, whereas only 42% of male Fellows reported the same, suggesting that women still find it harder to access early-stage funds (or perhaps funds in general).

Not surprisingly, the number of Fellows citing the stipend from Ashoka Fellowship to be the first significant source of funding dropped in more recent years; a sign of a maturing field with more opportunities for early-stage innovators. For example, 65% of Fellows elected in the 1990s described the stipend as their first significant source of funding, versus 35% of Fellows elected over the last five years.

Still, these numbers reveal that even 40 years after Ashoka pioneered the field of social entrepreneurship, somewhere between a third and a half of our incoming Fellows across the globe get their first critical financial boost from Ashoka. Moreover, more than two thirds reported that the stipend helps them focus full-time on their ideas. For some, this means dropping the day and a half a week of consulting work they were holding onto to make ends meet. For others, it might mean they can hire another colleague and spend more time doing what is most strategic for them.

In conclusion, the 2021 Global Fellows Study showed once more that Ashoka's selection process continues to be valued by the social entrepreneurs who successfully advance through it, particularly if they come from less privileged backgrounds and lead non-profit organizations. It remains to be seen whether the process is valuable also for those social entrepreneurs who ultimately do not become Ashoka Fellows. It would be harder to collect data from those individuals, as they may be less keen to further engage with Ashoka, but further research in this area is recommended, perhaps with strong involvement from third parties.

## References

1. Ashoka, “Emerging Insights 2019: Introduction: Ashoka: Everyone a Changemaker” (2020). <https://www.ashoka.org/en/story/emerging-insights-2019-introduction>.
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Fellows were asked to state whether they belonged to any minority groups in the  
countries they live in, across different categories such as race, religion, sexual orientation,  
etc.
3. Michael Zakaras, “Let’s Redraw the Map”, *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (2016),  
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5. Michael Zakaras, “Let’s Redraw the Map,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (2016),  
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