The Future of Social Entrepreneurship Support

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Abstract

Based on the results of the 2021 Ashoka Global Fellows Survey, this article discusses the big shifts that Ashoka sees in the field of social entrepreneurship. Further, it highlights the importance of system change, changemaking leadership, and well-being for supporting social entrepreneurs. The analysis shows that accessing network assets is key for scaling systems change and reflects on developing collective action as the next frontier in social entrepreneurship. The article gives insights into Ashoka's Global Fellowship program, highlights practical examples, and points to further information and resources.

Introduction

Ashoka has supported social entrepreneurs for +40 years, continuously expanding and deepening its support programs to meet the needs of around 3,700 Ashoka Fellows in over 90 countries. Over the years, we have learned from the inspiring and insightful leadership of Ashoka Fellows from around the globe. We work closely with our Fellows and other community members to transform their challenges into meaningful learning experiences and support programs. As social entrepreneurs continue to adapt to our changing world, so will will our support and understanding of what makes it most impactful. We are guided by the core belief that entrepreneurial support programs must derive from the lived experience of social entrepreneurs.

The Ashoka Global Fellows Study is a good opportunity to take stock of the Ashoka Fellowship and update our programs based on the results we see. In 2021, the qualitative and quantitative parts of the study strengthened some previous trends identified in terms of support for social entrepreneurs. They helped us design and incorporate new elements into our Fellowship program. In this article, we will look at the big shifts we observe happening in the field of social entrepreneurship, followed by a depiction of the priorities and directions of support that Ashoka will focus on moving ahead.

Five shifts in the social entrepreneurship field

The social entrepreneurship field is constantly evolving and the ways of supporting their work is changing too. There are new practices appearing, new insights emerging, and new research helping social entrepreneurs maximize impact. We see a series of shifts in practice and mindsets of social entrepreneurs reflected in the Ashoka Global Fellow Study, paving the way for the future of social entrepreneurship support. These include:

1. *A shift in in strategy and focus.* Strategies of social entrepreneurs increasingly embrace, navigate, and steer complex system dynamics. Thinking holistically, mapping systems, including diverse perspectives, and targeting leverage points to unleash dormant energies become building blocks for strategy development.[1] 93% of Ashoka Fellows taking part in the survey reported having achieved public policy change through their work, 82% of Fellows stated that Ashoka has supported them to see their work at a systems level, and 94% reported they adjust their strategy based on those insights.[2]

2. *An expansion of awareness of the importance of the ecosystem,[3] culture, and trust.* Social entrepreneurs build solutions together with interconnected and interdependent actors in their area of expertise. Moreover, they collectively create a shared purpose that forms the basis for lasting change. Often, this involves re-imagining old ways of interpreting reality and re-framing learned thought patterns. 88% of Fellows surveyed aim to influence societal mindsets and cultural norms with their ideas. As culture represents the collective creation of meaning, social entrepreneurs become culture makers, purpose producers, and mindset shifters.

3. *An organizational shift from closed organizations to open, fluid teams that unlock collective power.* Social entrepreneurs organize as networks and communities to mobilize ecosystems for change. According to the survey, 77% of Ashoka Fellows work together with more than 4 partners to achieve impact. Social entrepreneurship is increasingly about building strategic alliances, multi-stakeholder coalitions, and social movements.[4]

4. *A shift in leadership from a command-and-control style to leadership that unlocks the changemaking potential of everyone.* Social entrepreneurs create the conditions for others to be changemakers at all levels. According to the survey, 92% of the Fellows created the conditions for people in their target group to develop changemaking skills, and 89% put young people in charge to lead. 88% of Fellows reported that Ashoka helped to see themselves differently as leaders and 96% reported changing how they lead because of the support received from Ashoka.

5. *A personal shift from sacrifice to wellbeing and inner growth.[5]* Self-care allows for long-term resilience, and this is a subject more and more relevant and acknowledged by social entrepreneurs. Already 53% of Fellows in the survey sample received 'well-being' support from Ashoka´s community over the past year, despite this being a relatively new type of support.

The importance of systems thinking, changemaking leadership and well-being

The results of the survey and these five shifts identified above suggest that support programs for social entrepreneurs should incorporate learning formats on how to develop and implement an effective strategy for changing systems; on enabling social entrepreneurs to build leadership capacity that ignites the changemaking potential in others; on working collaboratively and collectively within an ecosystem; and on promoting wellbeing as an essential force for effective social impact work. These features have become key priorities for Ashoka's Fellowship program across the globe.

Support on those issues is highly demanded by Ashoka Fellows. According to the survey, 77% of the Fellows surveyed have received strategic guidance from Ashoka and its

community. 63% ranked it as being most important for their work among all the types of support we inquired about. We have developed online and offline learning formats with Fellows and partners around the world to embrace those features. We started to synthesise and standardize know-how and set-up learning journeys on system change, well-being, co-creation, collective impact and changemaking leadership for our community with hundreds of participants each year.[6] Our latest report, "Supporting System Changers. The role of systems thinking, changemaking leadership and wellbeing"[7] captures the essence of our learnings and offers a practical guide for supporters of social entrepreneurs.

Accessing network assets is key for scaling and system change

Beyond the features highlighted above, many other areas of support remain relevant. Ashoka's Fellowship program continues to offer Fellows financial support via a stipend and security for life-threatening situations. Moreover, it bridges connections to a wide variety of funders, and it actively facilitates new partnerships for Fellows.

Thanks to Ashoka and its global community, 54% of Fellows surveyed received access to new funders and this was ranked fourth in importance among all the support dimensions offered by Ashoka. Facilitating partnerships is also essential. 70% of Fellows surveyed report having gained new partnerships through Ashoka´s network-building activities. Ashoka Fellows partner most frequently with NGOs (85%), local governments (77%), universities (72%), and corporations (67%). Funders and partnerships are vital fuel for scaling the impact of Ashoka Fellows. Learning how to keep increasing the "network effect" of our community is thus core to our Fellowship program.
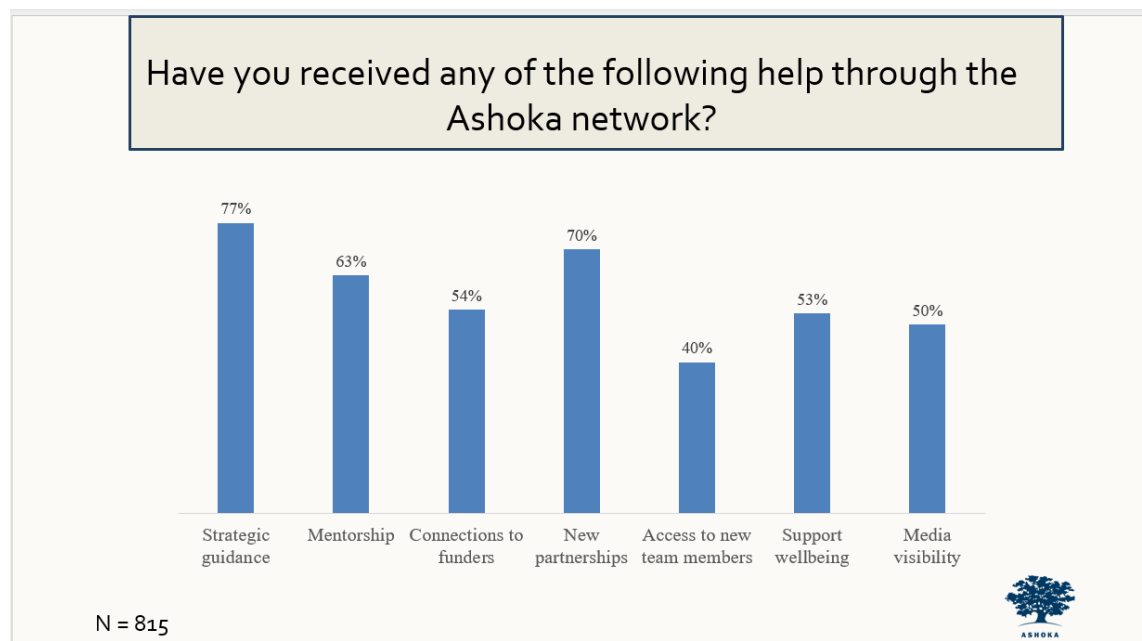

Figure 1: Main support areas from Ashoka for the social entrepreneurs

The support Ashoka is offering helps Fellows boost their impact and spread their ideas. 85% of Fellows surveyed say Ashoka helped them to increase their impact. On average, Ashoka Fellows in the sample scale to 5-6 countries and 77% see their idea replicated by other organisations and institutions. Ashoka programs like the Globalizer,[8] Aspire,[9] or Impact

Transfer[10] support Fellows to develop systemic scaling pathways, to utilize platforms for exponential scaling, or to master cross-border replication.

Developing collective action is the next frontier

At Ashoka, we are experimenting globally with many formats for unlocking the network power of our local, national and international communities. Overall, 80% of Fellows surveyed feel strongly connected to the Ashoka community, 66% of them to its international dimension. This is the core value of Ashoka´s global Fellow community, as trust and belonging are the basis for collaboration. 75% of Ashoka Fellow surveyed partner with other Ashoka Fellows and 30% of Fellows have partnered with more than six other Ashoka Fellows. This is the power of the network we aim to keep expanding and strengthening.

Across the globe, Fellows start joining forces to collectively tackle systemic challenges, from eroding democracies to food insecurity, climate change, and gender inequality. For example, 17 Ashoka Fellows from nine countries in West Africa founded the cooperative ICON (Innovative Cooperative for Optimal Nutrition) to improve food security in the region.[11] 20 other Ashoka Fellows in Europe joined forces to start the initiative "Bioregional Weaving Labs" to fight biodiversity loss.[12] In Africa, Latin America, South-East Asia, and Europe, Fellows co-create health initiatives for the challenges brought about by COVID-19.[13] In Indonesia, 10 Fellows work together to address issues related to aging and longevity and in the Philippines, Fellows co-create the initiative "Barangay Resilience and Innovation Through Empowerment" to improve disaster preparedness and response.[14] There are many more collective collaborations in the making around the world, often triggered through specialized Ashoka programs, but increasingly self-organized.

Because of this, Ashoka's Fellowship keeps on evolving. We aim to re-position it within our larger ambition to create one diverse, equitable, and inclusive global community of peers that collaborate fluently across teams, issue areas, and geographical levels to tackle the big challenges of our times together. This means that we understand our community needs to become a collective force to drive large scale and systemic change, where everyone can participate and contribute and where everyone engages others as co-leaders.

Sharing learnings as a way to make progress on social change

Ashoka strives to continuously share its experience in supporting social entrepreneurs. By sharing our learnings, we hope to provide our colleagues and partners in the growing social entrepreneurship ecosystem with valuable inspiration and practical insights for their work. We hope to spark meaningful dialogue about how this movement can continue to improve and to help building new alliances that innovate together.

Such an example is Catalyst 2030, a global initiative of social entrepreneurs and social innovators from all sectors who share the common goal of creating innovative, people-centric approaches to attain the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.[15] Our reports "Embracing Complexity. Towards a shared understanding of funding systems change"[16] and "New Allies. How governments can unlock the potential of social entrepreneurs for the common good"[17] sparked global debates. With the 2021 Ashoka Global Fellows Study,[18] our latest report[19] and many more to come we aim to continue sharing our learnings that have emerged as essential to our global Fellowship program.

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