

Scaling to system change: how social entrepreneurs affect public policy

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Abstract

Although social entrepreneurs have been helping the improvement of policies for decades now, their role and contribution are still largely undocumented in research and not recognized by the policy community and wider public. This leads to social entrepreneurs still being unknown and rarely invited to the policy conversation table. Simultaneously, it deprives the policy process of deeper insights about the problem essence and evidence, a profound understanding of the needs of the affected communities, and ways of addressing the problem that have been refined and tested by the social entrepreneurs and their teams in order to reduce the risks of implementation. It represents a missed opportunity for addressing social issues collaboratively in a faster, more efficient, and effective manner.

This article aims to share examples of how social entrepreneurs have managed to achieve systemic improvements through policy changes at local, national, and international levels. The article also posits that larger ecosystem measures are needed to enable the effective harvesting and use of social entrepreneurs' experience for system change. This includes building bridges between policymakers and social entrepreneurs and transforming the way in which policy is designed and implemented.

Policy and social innovation: Worlds apart?

Ashoka's social entrepreneurs have been solving deep-rooted social problems with their innovations for many decades now. In some cases, these innovations have been taken up by governments and supported by public institutions, but a disconnect between the world of policy and social innovation continues to exist.

This disconnect creates a barrier to designing policies that provide systemic solutions to the most pressing challenges of our time, like climate change and inequality. Although social innovation has been shaping policies for decades now, its role and contribution are still largely unknown, creating a missed opportunity for amplifying social impact. Social innovation is best placed to contribute to public policies and new approaches that deal with social issues, if it is built into policymaking processes more systematically.¹

The following article builds on the data gathered in the Ashoka 2021 Global Fellows Study to present how social entrepreneurs influence policy and contribute to system change in their

respective fields. The final part of the article discusses what is needed to bridge the gap between the areas of social innovation and policymaking, and suggests the way forward.

How Ashoka Fellows practice policy change

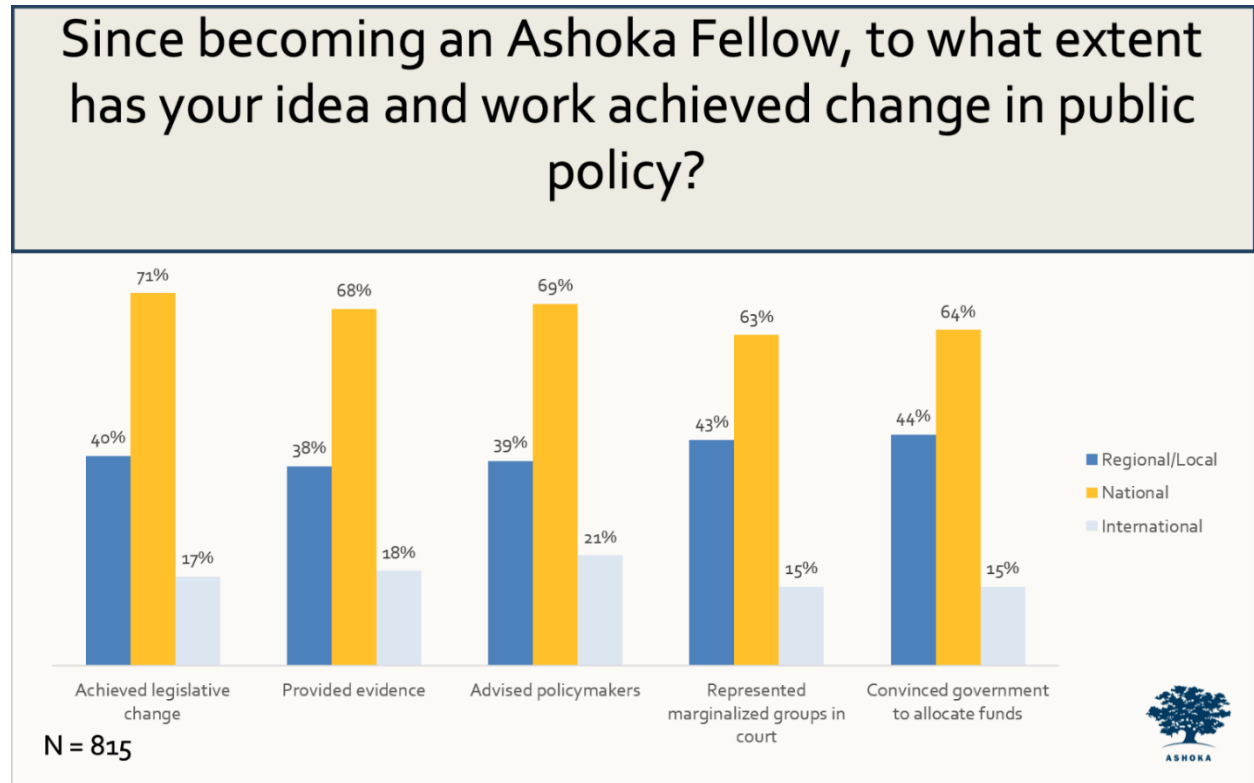


Figure 1: Ashoka Fellows’ influence on policymaking.

According to the findings of the Ashoka 2021 Global Survey, 93% of respondents reported having achieved change in public policy since becoming an Ashoka Fellow. They have done so in at least one of the areas above (see figure 1), which range from advising policymakers to shaping legislation and government decisions.

We have identified three major ways in which social entrepreneurs contribute to improving policies: by increasing policymakers’ awareness of the social or environmental situation and sometimes even of the role of government in addressing it; by building policymakers’ willingness to take action on the problem; and by building their capacity to implement the change. Many Ashoka Fellows around the world are working on these dimensions, as the following examples illustrate.

One example of raising awareness among policymakers and providing them with scientific evidence has been the work of Ashoka Fellow Flaviano Bianchini, founder of Source International.² Based on the participatory research of affected communities, Flaviano, together

with a group of scientists and lawyers, has been generating evidence of health damage and human rights violations resulting from extractive industries, especially in Latin America. One of their prominent success stories can be found in the research conducted in Peru between 2007 and 2009 on the magnitude of the environmental damage caused to the community of Cerro de Pasco resulting from irregular mining practices.³ The research findings were translated into urgent actions to restore the environment and natural resources and prompted the health minister to declare the territory of Cerro de Pasco as an emergency state. Later in 2018, the Peruvian government decided to allocate funds for remediation, an action that was also a direct result of their awareness raising campaign.

Klára Laurenčíková in the Czech Republic is an example of a former government vice-minister turned social entrepreneur who worked to increase awareness, willingness, and capacity of government counterparts to implement change.⁴ After realizing that children with various health conditions, as well as children from economically disadvantaged and minority or immigrant backgrounds are segregated in schools, Klára collected evidence and built a coalition of advocates to persuade the Czech government to embrace a supportive stance for inclusion in the education system. In order to achieve this objective, she actively worked with the government in changing the education law and implementing the reforms in a truly systematic way so that an inclusive approach to education is practiced in every school around the country.

While the scale of the policy impact achieved by social entrepreneurs has been mainly at national or local levels, some Ashoka Fellows have been able to go beyond national boundaries and drive change at the European and international levels. Such is the case of Paul Radu, co-founder of the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), a global network of investigative journalists who expose crime and corruption to hold power accountable and inform the public. Their investigations have resulted in hundreds of legal cases being opened and have contributed to \$7.3 billion in fines levied and money seized since 2011.⁵ Together with other advocacy organizations, OCCRP has also pushed for policy change, eventually prompting the European Commission to launch an ambitious package of legislative proposals in 2021 to strengthen the rules to combat money laundering.

Creating a mindset shift is one of the steps needed to achieve change in public policy. And as the example of Denis Mizne shows, a lot of minds need to be changed to achieve systemic transformation.⁶ 12 years ago, Denis founded the *Sou da Paz* (I Am for Peace) program to reduce Brazil's gun violence. He soon realized that to achieve this goal, he would need to cooperate with different actors, from the government to the police, and to involve not only experts in the field, but also citizens to build societal demand for gun control. His campaigns resulted in the government passing the Statute of Disarmament which prompted a 90% reduction in gun sales and a 70% fall in homicides between 1999 and 2008 in the state of São Paulo. In achieving this, Denis acted as a bridge between different stakeholders to reduce gun violence and contributed to improving the public image of the police and the government in Brazil by increasing people's trust in these institutions.

Achieving systemic change through policy: The way forward.

As seen in the previous cases, no single organization or individual working in isolation can achieve system change. It requires the participation of many stakeholders and implementers who gradually shift toward new ways of thinking and doing. In this complex interaction of actors and processes, governments play a crucial role in enabling and supporting the path toward system-level change. As highlighted in a report published by Ashoka and McKinsey in 2020, when governments engage and collaborate with social entrepreneurs, the full potential of social innovation is unlocked.⁷ Hence the importance of bridging social innovation and policymaking.

Some Ashoka programs like Hello Europe⁸ have started to experiment at this intersection by establishing permanent exchange tools and spaces to bring together social entrepreneurs and policymakers to co-create policy.⁹ In 2019, Hello Europe's migration policy unit was established in Brussels to connect migration-related solutions with key decision-makers to think and work together towards a new human-centered paradigm that sees migration as an asset and an opportunity for our society, instead of a threat. Throughout 2020 and 2021, Hello Europe organized a series of policy salons where Ashoka Fellows had the opportunity to present their innovations for change to policymakers and other stakeholders.¹⁰ These conversations have opened the door to shape new policies around migrant and refugee inclusion inspired by the work of Fellows like David Lubell, who helps cities reinvent themselves into more inclusive and cohesive places, or by Gonzalo Fanjul's alternative labor migration models for migrants.¹¹

The initial outcomes of the Hello Europe policy unit¹² show that social entrepreneurs have the potential to inform better policies and actions to address the challenges our society is currently facing. However, barriers remain in the way to socially innovative policymaking. This is primarily because innovative holistic solutions often require rising above the short-term policy cycles to deliver meaningful long-term impact. They demand time, capacity, and funds, which are scarce resources among policymakers. On the other hand, social innovation and policymaking tend to work in inverse ways. While social innovation is a bottom-up exercise that begins with people identifying a societal problem and designing solutions throughout the process, policymaking is a top-down process that is not only very complex to navigate, but also difficult to access and participate in. Therefore, the challenge not only lies in continuing to build bridges, but also in transforming the way policy is designed and implemented to make it more participatory and oriented towards system change.

In 2021, Ashoka launched the Changemaker Europe initiative¹³ which aims at building a more innovative and inclusive policymaking process where social entrepreneurs and other change actors can be involved in designing the policies needed for social progress. A first step will consist in building the capacities of both social entrepreneurs and policymakers to work with one another, while equipping them with the necessary skills and tools to integrate social innovation in the policy process. We are not starting from scratch; Hello Europe has already started to lay the first building blocks of this vision and its methodology can be easily replicated to other policy fields. While the shift towards new ways of doing policy may take time, the examples and methods presented in this article hope to serve as a basis to develop a systemic approach to policymaking.

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