

An Innovative Partnerships Model for a World in Constant Change

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Keywords: corporate partnerships, business, co-creation, corporate social responsibility (CSR), corporate shared value (CSV), social innovation, change management

Abstract

Ashoka has developed a unique partnership model with companies and social entrepreneurs, in which each organization collaborates and learns from the other partners to drive the deepest impact. In these “Changemaker Company” partnerships, companies fund the partnership and get opportunities to invest in and engage with entrepreneurs driving meaningful social change. Their employees engage in changemaking, gain skills, and ideate on how their company might play a stronger role in driving social innovation in ways coherent with their core business. Social entrepreneurs gain access to critical resources and are supported to scale their impact and develop partnerships with multinational corporations. The outcome is a long-term, multi-stakeholder alliance that contributes to systemic change, while enabling all engaged organizations to evolve their ability to drive social impact.

The Need for Effective Corporate Partnership Models

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed a myriad of challenges that need to be systematically addressed. From the inequitable access to effective healthcare, to the disproportionate impact of global warming on the most disenfranchised communities, from the growing role that technology plays in democracy and privacy rights, to deepening wealth gaps, global mental health crises, and large looming questions about the future of work (to name a few). 93% of Ashoka Fellows surveyed as part of the 2021 Ashoka Global Fellows Study report that the COVID–19 developments are at least slightly affecting how they create impact. 37% report significant effects on their work.

A time of extreme upheaval and enormous complexity requires innovative alliances that are a match for the multifaceted nature of the problems at hand. Indeed, the UN’s Strategic Development Goals¹ are clear about the role of cross-sectoral partnerships in bringing about change: SDG 17 sets the objective of developing ‘partnerships for the goals’, including a target to build multi-stakeholder partnerships that will enable sharing knowledge, expertise, technology, and financial resources to advance the goals. Based on our expertise supporting social entrepreneurs and partnering with companies over the last two decades, Ashoka has co-developed with some of our long-term corporate partners a unique partnership model, in which each organization is empowered to drive the deepest impact. In these “Changemaker Company” partnerships, Ashoka plays the role of convener, driver of transformation for companies and social entrepreneurs, and steward of an impact standard that leads to systems change. Companies

fund the partnership and get opportunities to invest in and engage with entrepreneurs driving meaningful social change. Individuals in companies engage in changemaking, gain skills, and ideate on how their company might play a stronger role in driving social innovation in ways coherent with their core business. And social entrepreneurs gain access to critical resources and are supported to scale their impact and develop partnerships with multinational corporations.

The Changemaker Companies Model

Historically, it's been hard for social entrepreneurs to meaningfully engage with companies.² Despite the potential benefits to both, there are many barriers to overcome, such as the complex internal decision-making procedures of companies that often are prohibitive for small, agile, and funding-strapped social entrepreneurs to spend time on. Adding a global facilitating organization like Ashoka to the mix spares social entrepreneurs the high transaction costs of engaging with companies, while providing the company with a counterpart who can co-create and roll out change management programs at a scale that make sense for large, resource-rich, global entities like corporations.

These partnerships therefore tend to be global in scale, touching multiple countries, and providing a substantial influx of resources into the social enterprise sector. What is unique about Changemaker Company partnerships is that they strive to engage primarily individuals in the company with strong ties to core business and operations, including HR, innovation teams, and product development teams, avoiding an interaction only with a CSR or marketing department, as is usually the case with many corporate partnerships with the social sector. Thus, a two-way learning mechanism is created, in which companies support and contribute to social entrepreneurs and their work, while also learning from entrepreneurs' strategic ways of working.

At the core of our partnership model is the concept of 'team of teams',³ in which fluid cross-functional, cross-organizational teams form between companies and the social sector to solve a particular social problem at scale. This work is only a few years old, yet early results in pioneering companies show how the emergence of these teams (of teams) can scale impact by combining the power of large corporations with the agility of small teams.⁴ Success will be linked to many of these teams emerging across companies, industries, and issue areas. Recently, we have endeavored to capture why these three-way partnerships are so impactful. In our pioneer partnership with pharmaceutical company Boehringer Ingelheim, we have led a 10-year collaborative journey between the company and a community of social entrepreneurs, working together towards *Making More Health (MMH)*.⁵ The partnership aims to achieve better access and quality of healthcare for humans and animals through connecting innovative and entrepreneurial solutions for healthcare provision with business expertise. The MMH team has commissioned [a study on the 10 principles for effective partnerships between business and civil society](#)⁶ that capture the learnings thus far on how to drive these partnerships forward. Most of these principles relate to the 'team of teams' mindset of agility and working across silos. They touch on topics such as fostering flexibility to maintain creativity, finding local community partners who can provide deep understanding and inspiration, and the importance of investing in aligning working styles.

The Interactions of Social Entrepreneurs and Companies

Our 2021 Ashoka Global Fellows Study similarly contains meaningful insights into how and why partnerships between social entrepreneurs and companies are a driving engine behind policy change, market change, and mindset shifts in nearly every problem the world is facing today. The data illustrate how Ashoka Fellows engage with companies and how this leads to more social impact, complementing our insights from the Changemaker Company partnerships and informing the future of this type of collaborations.

Corporate partnerships are frequent

On average, 67% of Ashoka Fellows partner with companies, the fourth most frequent type of partner after NGOs, local and regional governments, and universities. 70% of female social entrepreneurs partner with companies compared to 65% of male social entrepreneurs. A female social entrepreneur we interviewed summed it up:

“I think what I would have done differently is I would have started partnerships earlier. So, in the beginning, I did a lot just me and the team, but I would have started working on making sure that we had that more collective approach and doing partnerships.”

Through their interactions with Ashoka, 70% of Fellows report forming new partnerships, primarily with corporations and business people, as well as with other entities such as universities and other NGOs. 77% report having gained strategic guidance and over 50% having gained connections to funders. These three dimensions (new partnerships, connections to funders, and strategic guidance) are reportedly the most important contributions Ashoka makes to Fellows’ work. Though not all partners are companies, these results highlight the important role of strategic partnerships in further developing the work of Fellows and in scaling systemic change through social innovation. The results also highlight the role that Ashoka plays in facilitating partnerships between social entrepreneurs and corporate actors, sometimes through the Changemakers Companies model.

Social impact informing corporate partnerships

Ashoka Fellows work in a wide range of areas, including economic development, education, health, human rights, planet and climate, civic participation, technology for good, and many more. This network of social entrepreneurs extends across over 90 countries on every continent. Most Fellows tend to focus on local or regional issues, with 79% of the Fellows taking part in the survey working in 5 countries or less. This local, grassroots knowledge is part of what makes them so effective at tackling the complex problems they are trying to solve. This unique expertise lies also at the core of the partnerships they develop, including with corporates. Ashoka Fellows achieve changes in market-based economic systems.

Overall, 94% of respondents to the global survey generate system change in at least one of the ways of assessing market change that we captured (see figure 1). Social entrepreneurs are driving

market innovation either by creating new markets (60% at the national level), by creating value for an impact product or service (56% at the national level), or by increasing market transparency (56% at the national level). Our corporate partnerships assume that this positive impact on economic systems can only increase and deepen through interaction with companies, who are the stronger market players.

Since becoming an Ashoka Fellow, to what extent has your idea achieved change in market systems?

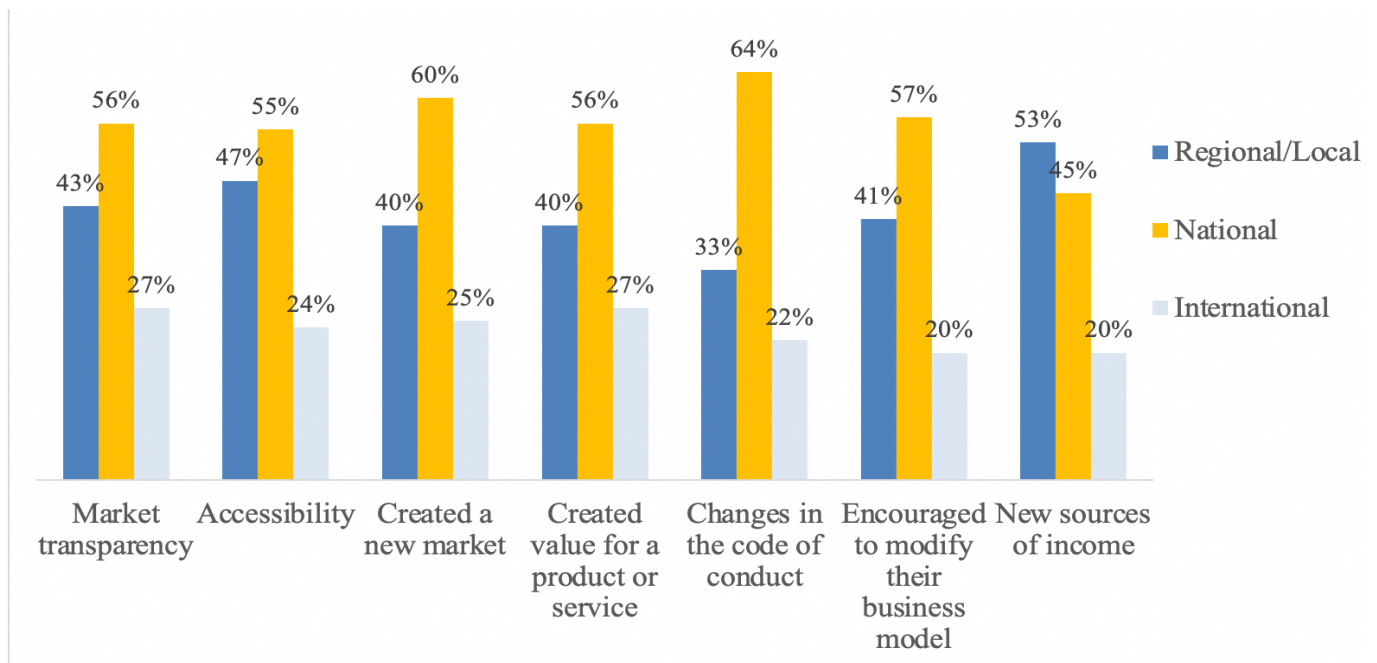


Figure 1: Ashoka Fellows’ impact on market change

There are many more ways in which Ashoka Fellows are driving local and national impact all over the world. The Ashoka Fellows responding to the global survey reach an estimate of more than 600 million people directly through their programs or services. Considering that they are just a quarter or the social entrepreneurs in the Ashoka network, the number of people directly reached by Ashoka Fellows is potentially in the billion range. This is not, however, the most impactful aspect of our Fellowship. Over 69% of Fellows from the Global Fellows Study report that their work activates others to be changemakers to various degrees. In our view, this is an extremely important measure of impact since it is through increasing individuals’ self-permission and know-how to drive positive change in the world that we can achieve a continuously healthier society and better relationship with our planet.

Changemaker Company partnerships provide opportunities for companies to engage in this meaningful work with social entrepreneurs, who are “impact natives” (i.e., impact is at the core of what they do and they have always operated in an impact-first mode). Through the partnerships, the Ashoka Changemaker Companies program curates experiences for employees

and executives at all levels to engage with social entrepreneurs and their work, and they are thus empowered to become changemakers. Developing the [attitudes, skills, mindsets, and behaviors](#)⁷ of individuals who drive systems change solutions as part of their work, community, and family life will hopefully be the strongest driving force of business transformation towards positive social and environmental impact.

Once employees can recognize opportunities to do well by doing good, they will know better than anyone how to work inside their organization – and in partnership with impact professionals – to build products, services, solutions, processes, and technologies that are better for society and the planet. This learning component is key, as it enables companies to see how they can remain socially relevant by identifying new markets, new practices, and new value creation opportunities that have a social or environmental value-add, as well as a financial one.

Conclusion

Partnerships between the leaders of the social sector and large companies are becoming increasingly common, involving at least two thirds of social entrepreneurs surveyed in the 2021 Ashoka Global Fellows Study. It is important to move beyond CSR approaches that do not dent in the core business of the company. Companies are thus enabled to walk the talk by investing in systems change that is coherent with their business. They also learn how to drive social innovation as part of their role in the world, and how to reconcile and fuel this with the profit motive.

Increasingly, social entrepreneurs and companies create teams-of-teams to co-create a solution to a common problem. Chances of success are higher if the company is involved at all levels of management and when social impact is part of an overall shared purpose of the company, not just of one of its units. The Changemaker Company partnership model builds upon the strong engagement of Ashoka Fellows with the business world, as well as on their impact on markets and on fostering changemaking skills in various stakeholder groups. Through Ashoka's intermediary role, Changemaker Company partnerships pilot an alternative way of collaborating for social impact.

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