Cultural, Geopolitical, and Structural Barriers to Social Innovation
Ashoka's 2022 Changemaker Education Research Forum
Overview & Summary Stream 2

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Abstract

Cultural, geopolitical, and structural barriers prevent many social innovation initiatives from achieving their desired impact. These barriers include social pressures, regulatory burdens, lack of resources (funding, people, knowledge), and inequitable power structures. Fortunately, there are many ways to overcome these barriers – including judicious engagement with higher education. In order to build a world where "everyone is a changemaker," Ashoka has hosted an annual changemaker education research forum (CERF). Ashoka's 2022 CERF was designed to create the conditions for deeper collaboration and knowledge-sharing amongst the Changemaker network and beyond. This paper is an overview of one of the streams (areas of inquiry) presented at CERF 2022 and enhanced throughout this issue of the *Social Innovations Journal (SIJ).* The focus of this stream was *Cultural, Geopolitical, and Structural Barriers to Social Innovation.* The research was focused on three interrelated areas: education and responsible knowledge production, international perspectives and development, and finally, the complicated relationship between social innovations at the local vs. global level.

Ashoka's 2022 Changemaker Education Research Forum

Ashoka: Innovators for the Public has been identifying, supporting, and learning from some of the most innovative social entrepreneurs for 40 years. Ashoka aims to build a world where "everyone is a changemaker" so that "solutions outrun problems." To facilitate this, an annual Changemaker[i] Education[ii] Research Forum (CERF)[iii] has been developed to bring together practitioners and scholars from across the world to enhance the knowledge base of social innovation and change-making. Much of the research presented at Ashoka's 2022 CERF is further explored and elaborated on in articles within this issue of the *Social Innovations Journal (SIJ)*.

Ashoka's 2022 CERF was designed to create the conditions for deeper collaboration and knowledge-sharing amongst the Changemaker network[iv] and beyond, tapping into valuable insights from Ashoka Fellows, academics, researchers, Change Leaders, university staff, and students.[v] Research proposals were solicited via outreach to scholars and practitioners within Ashoka's global community of higher education institutions, Ashoka Fellows, and other partners.

Cultural, Geopolitical, and Structural Barriers to Social Innovation

The 2022 Forum focused on two interconnected streams of research. Stream 1 focused on the impact of social innovation education, an overview of which is provided elsewhere in this issue of Social Innovations Journal (SIJ). Stream 2 of the 2022 Forum focused on Cultural, Geopolitical, and Structural Barriers to Social Innovation *and is the focus of this overview.*

Providing innovative solutions to social issues can be hindered by several barriers. Innovative solutions can lead to both positive and negative outcomes. Discourses about social innovation and impact are often focused on positive outcomes such as improving access to key goods and services, improving governance, lifting those who have been suppressed, facilitating resilience and promoting sustainability, and even reducing global inequities (Eichler, Georg, and Schwarz 2019; Leal Filho et al. 2022).[vi]

Unfortunately, there are often barriers to achieving positive outcomes. As presenters noted, these may include cultural and social barriers (**Malhotra**, **Olaniru**), government and regulatory issues (**Castro Mina**), and financial barriers (**van der Meer**). Efforts to apply innovative approaches to social issues may even worsen problems – especially when the specific, unique context of a social issue is not understood and the key stakeholders are not adequately involved. This may include reinforcing or widening inequities and may happen due to the failure to appreciate and address root causes (**Ighagbon**, **Obounou**) (Oeij, Van Der Torre, Vaas, and Dhondt 2019). [vii]

Higher education has an important role to play. It can promote positive social innovation outcomes through research and the generation of new knowledge and ideas, provide education and training, and serve as convener and partner to communities, businesses, and other stakeholders (Castro Torres and Alburez-Gutierrez 2022; Alang, Batts, and Letcher 2021).[viii]

However, as presenters highlighted, there are also barriers to constructive higher education involvement. These include institutional incentive structures and regulatory priorities (**Staunch**) (MacCleoud 2019),[ix] and even epistemological conflicts (**Murphy**) (Vickers 2020, Tommasini 2021). Furthermore, higher education may worsen social issues by reinforcing inequitable power structures, which may be done via limiting access[x] and the hegemony of knowledge production (Battiste 2011, Mwangi et al. 2018, Shahjahan 2016, Stein 2017).[xi]

The research developed for this stream was curated by three co-chairs:
- Athena Madan, CCC Ph.D. CPH, Assistant Professor, Sociology of Global Health & Development, University of Victoria, Education Co-Chair, Consortium of Universities for Global Health (CUGH)
- Robert Mittelman, Ph.D., Interim Dean, Faculty of Management, Royal Roads University
- Kenny Panza, Network Engagement & Knowledge Mobilization Associate, Ashoka Canada

These co-chairs brought to this research focus their expertise in areas as diverse as global health, business, management, entrepreneurship, human security, peacebuilding, physics, and space science. A brief overview of the research presented will be provided below. In addition, most of the presenters from this stream further developed their research and have published it in this special issue of the *Social Innovations Journal*.

The research developed in this stream broadly fell into three interconnected areas of inquiry under the larger category of *identifying and overcoming barriers to social innovation*:
- Education and responsible knowledge production;
- International perspectives and development; and
- The complicated relationship between social innovations at the local vs. the global level.

Researchers, practitioners, and students were invited to share research and experiences highlighting cultural, geopolitical, and structural barriers to social innovation. These could include frameworks, discourses, practices, and considerations surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), as well as Indigenous engagement, decolonial approaches, and anti-racist applications to social innovation. Presenters were encouraged to highlight research focused on identifying, dismantling, and mitigating social, economic, political, and environmental barriers to social innovation.[xii]

The research focused on identifying barriers related to inequitable power structures and identifying examples, definitions, and theoretical frameworks to dismantle these power structures and foster greater equity through social innovation.

Stream 2a: Education – Responsibility in Knowledge Production and Stewardship

Analyzing and reflecting on the role of education – particularly our responsibilities in knowledge production and stewardship were the focus of the first two presentations.

Dr. Laura Murphy at Tulane University discussed *Navigating Across Territories of Social Innovation and Changemaking.* She provided an overview of a map developed to help students, scholars, and practitioners identify their current location in terms of epistemologies (ways of knowing) and ontologies (ways of being) and thus understand their relationships to other ways of knowing and being. Her work has been published in this issue as *A map of social innovation territories: a tool for navigating diverse disciplines and fields of practice.*

Was it accidental that social innovation learning began happening in higher education? **James Staunch** at Mount Royal University argued that it was an "unhappy accident" and elaborated on *The Twisted, Tortuous Path to Social Innovation Success in Post-secondary.* He reflected on some of the barriers preventing social innovation learning from becoming better integrated into higher education and provided some potential pathways for overcoming these barriers. He elaborates on both the barriers and solutions to these barriers in his article *Diagnosing the Social Innovation Challenge in Universities* included in this issue.

Sub-stream 2b: International Perspectives and Development

The three presentations in this sub-stream highlighted barriers to social innovation initiatives in three countries: India, Nigeria, and Colombia. They also provided recommendations for overcoming these barriers to address significant social issues. Articles from each of these three presentations are published in this issue of *SIJ.*

Women entrepreneurs have enormous potential as social change agents but are often discriminated against and undervalued. **Eeshta Malhotra** of the Amani Institute shared their work with the Women in Indian Social Entrepreneurship Network (WISEN) program – discussing adaptations made due to the COVID-19 pandemic and their results. The lessons from the changes to this program have relevance for others wishing to create safe and effective networks to support the development of female entrepreneurs. A key lesson was the importance of focusing on collaboration rather than competition. By doing so, they were able to create a safe "professional community of practice where women entrepreneurs across sectors and regions can come together, harness the collective intelligence and resources of a network, and find ways to solve shared challenges effectively."[xiii]

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a significant social issue with many barriers preventing its elimination. **Dr. Boluwaji Olaniru** researched these barriers in Nigeria and provided suggestions for overcoming them. Dr. Olaniru is the founder of the Voices Against Female Genital Mutilation Foundation and the director of Women Focus Canada Inc. She expands on this research in her published article: *How Possible is it to Eliminate FGM? Uncovering Practice-Sustaining Barriers in South West Nigeria*. Her paper highlights myths about FGM, the reasoning behind why it is practiced, and the barriers that sustain the practice. She ends by providing concrete suggestions for overcoming these obstacles.

Maira Cristina Castro Mina is a Master of Arts Student at Simon Fraser University. At CERF 2022, she analyzed challenges facing social innovators in Colombia and provided solutions to overcome these barriers. Her article published in this issue of SIJ is *Social Innovation in Colombia: Analysis of the Structural Barriers and Opportunities*. Challenges faced include the intersections of inequalities and the environment. Obstacles to solving these challenges include regulatory and economic barriers such as the Colombian Land Reform. Mina provides examples of successful top-down and bottom-up approaches to overcoming these barriers and addressing these challenges.

Sub-stream 2c: Local vs. Global

When discussing social entrepreneurship, social innovation, and change-making worldwide, one is often confronted with the tensions between local vs. global contexts, solutions, and resources. The research presented under this sub-stream dealt with these tensions and is published in this issue of SIJ.

Aanu Ighagbon is an international development consultant. She presented the results of a study mapping humanitarian innovation funders. The results of the mapping exercise highlighted how heavily "top-down" funding models are, with donors dictating the terms of the

innovations they wish for local actors to create and implement. This leads to the funding of local projects that are not contextually appropriate and are highly burdensome in terms of bureaucracy. This takes resources away from work on the ground that actually needs to be done. Her article published in this *SIJ* issue is *Humanitarian Innovation Funding Mapping* and expands upon the study's findings and implications for equity between donors in higher-income countries and grantees in lower-income countries engaged with the actual work on the ground.

Fundraising culture provides many barriers to minority social entrepreneurs. To address this, a workshop was developed to support student minority founders embedded in their local communities. **Jen van der Meer** from The New School presented the development and subsequent impacts of this workshop at CERF 2022 via her presentation *Challenging the Barriers in Fundraising Culture: Exploring Community-Engaged Alternative Structures*. Her article in this issue provides more insight into the *Ownership Wayfinding Workshop Method* used and its impacts – including ways in which one can shift the focus away from the "vision of funders to the vision and actual needs of the community" and shift the model more towards "collective approaches to social entrepreneurship."

The Ties that Bind: Innovation Configuration Linkages in Low- and Middle-Income Healthcare Delivery Settings was the presentation by **Rebecca Obounou** of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology at CERF 2022. Her paper in this issue of *SIJ* dives more deeply into the differences and impacts of globally-founded vs. locally-founded social innovation initiatives within the Haitian healthcare system. *When Local Isn't Global: How Approaches to Healthcare Innovation in Low Resource Contexts Can Inform Changemaker Education* also provides recommendations for ways in which changemaker education in this space might adapt to promote more effective models of social innovation in location-dependent initiatives.

Conclusion

As with Stream 1, participants were filled with inspiration and hope about the future of this field. Participants left with an enhanced sense of inquiry, asking:
- *How can this field continue to be mutually enriched and challenged to grow in directions that go beyond our own local problems and beyond national socio-economic and political circumstances?*
- *How can this field remain relevant to local issues while effectively interacting with the enormous complexity of our interconnectedness and world of constant change?*

The embracing of the paradoxes inherent in local vs. global needs could perhaps be the way in which the field of social innovation can continue to grow.

The importance of these two streams to continue to advance in parallel was clear. Our interconnectedness demands that we not only learn about our most pressing local *and* global issues but to build collective alternatives for solutions. It demands that we create a world where everyone is a changemaker – everyone has the opportunities to learn and develop skills to collectively solve problems in innovative ways.

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[i] Ashoka considers a "changemaker" to be someone who is taking creative action to solve a social problem. Changemaking involves empathy, thoughtfulness, creativity, taking action and collaborative leadership. Ashoka Fellows are selected by Ashoka as the world's leading changemakers. https://www.ashoka.org/en-us/program/ashoka-fellowship. Changemaking and social innovation are often used interchangeably. A key difference is that a "changemaker" is someone who is a social entrepreneur and innovator who is focused on ensuring everyone involved realizes their own potential to create change.

[ii] Ashoka broadly defines "changemaker education" as education with the belief that anyone and everyone can make a difference. It promotes innovation and collaboration to address the world's most pressing challenges. Some of the world's most effective providers of changemaker education are Ashoka's Changemaker Campuses: https://ashokau.org/changemaker-campus-overview.

[iii] https://ashokau.org/research-forum.

[iv] Ashoka's network of changemakers includes Ashoka Fellows, representatives from Changemaker Campuses and other higher education institutions interested in social innovation and changemaking, Ashoka Young Changemakers, and others within these communities. A "Change Leader" is a liaison from a Changemaker Campus overseeing the integration of changemaking across and through their campus in close collaboration with Ashoka.

[v] The 2022 event was held in conjunction with the 2022 International Social Innovation Research Conference – enabling a broader audience. CERF 2022 was held as a hybrid event to increase access.

[vi] Many social innovation efforts are focused on making progress towards the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which aim for all of these things. Eichler, Georg, and Schwarz 2019, and Leal Filho et al, provide overviews of the current state of social innovation involvement with the SDGs.

[vii] Oeij et al provide an overview of some of the most common barriers which include:
- lack of key resources including funding, qualified personnel, knowledge gaps, organizational leadership capabilities;
- legal restrictions and insufficient political support; and
- lack of "infrastructural embedment, creating environments that are not friendly enough for sustaining and upscaling such initiatives" (para 1). As authors in this issue share, enabling community empowerment in the process overcomes some of these.

[viii] UN SDG 4 includes elements of this. See MacCleoud 2019 for a more in-depth discussion about how higher education can support progress to all of the UN SDGs.
Ashoka U designated **Changemaker Campuses** provide examples of higher education institutions that do this well. Learn more: https://ashokau.org/changemaker-campus-overview.

[ix] "[T]he articulated purpose of higher education lies somewhere along a spectrum of 'transactional,' reflecting a neoliberal economic approach of higher education, to 'transformative,' reflecting a value of local knowledges and sustainable, inclusive development..." (MacCleoud 2019, p. 18). This reflects the work of Brissett and Mitter (2017). Cummings et al. consider a similar spectrum where one end is "techno-scientific-economic' discourse aligned with the neoliberal and often individualistic perspective of education and development. The other end is the "pluralist-participatory" discourse which is aligned with views of education and development as transformational for communities. As several authors in this issue of *Social Innovations Journal* highlight, social innovation initiatives that are not developed by and with communities (pluralist-participatory) often face the greatest barriers and unintended negative consequences of exacerbating social issues and inequities.
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[x] For example, efforts to improve educational quality may lead to a decrease in access for underserved students as the increased costs become prohibitive. The neoliberal focus on higher education also leads to disparities as those with fewer resources are directed towards vocational-training programs while those with greater resources are directed towards more transformative forms of higher education and high-impact learning experiences (e.g., study abroad). Many also argue that the transactional / neoliberal approach to higher education further exacerbates problems. See for example: MacCleoud (2019), and Mundy, Karen, and Antoni Verger. "The World Bank and the global governance of education in a changing world order." *International Journal of Educational Development* 40 (2015): 9-18.

[xi] The hegemony of knowledge production is often "dictated by the Global North and its capitalist and colonialist power structures" (MacCleoud 2019, pp. 34-35). In addition to those cited above, see also the authors in this journal issue and their work summarized in "Advancing and Measuring the Impact of Changemaker (Social Innovation) Education" (Summary of 2022 CERF Stream 1) (Wray and Nash 2022).

[xii] Stream 2 Call for Proposals: https://ashokau.org/sites/ashokau/files/2022-06/CERF%202022%20Call%20for%20Proposal_%20Stream%202_.pdf.

[xiii] The presentation was entitled: "Strengthening Women Entrepreneurship in India as a Vehicle for Change".