

Ecosystem Accelerators: Social Entrepreneurs as Action Drivers in Multi-Stakeholder Approaches

By: Kenny Clewett¹

¹Co-director of Ashoka's Hello World initiative

Keywords: social innovation, Ashoka, migration, entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship, people on the move, refugees, ecosystem, design thinking

Abstract

Ashoka's Migration initiative, Hello World, piloted its 'Ecosystem Accelerator' in 2022 as a strategy to bring together multiple stakeholders to identify key problems, root causes, and solutions to a particular sector or ecosystem. By placing social entrepreneurs at the helm of the accelerator and focusing on action-oriented steps, it aims to build long-term collaboration through concrete achievements that participants develop. This article explores this model, its preliminary impact, factors for success, and the challenges it faces, and recommends ways to apply a similar methodology.

Introduction

In 2022, Ashoka's Migration initiative, Hello World, piloted its 'Ecosystem Accelerator' on the topic of Migration Entrepreneurship and Employment in Europe. The goal was to gather a small group of key leaders from affected stakeholder groups in the sector (i.e., ecosystem) to better understand the root causes of barriers to growth and design actions to accelerate positive impact. Systemic-thinking social entrepreneurs were put at the helm, leveraging their unique energy and leadership to drive the accelerator toward action. This factor proved essential to the Ecosystem Accelerator's success in the relevance of the recommendations and subsequent collaborative prototypes it produced. This article describes this unique multi-stakeholder approach, focusing on the features that make the model distinct and contribute to its success.

The Ecosystem Accelerator emerged from a convergence of ingredients. On the one hand, it draws from Ashoka and Hello World's deep experience in scaling social impact, much of which has been systematized to share with a broad network of social innovators and allies.ⁱ Indeed, by 2022, Hello World had already supported over 100 social innovators in the field of migration to scale throughout 17 countries in Europe and Latin America and had launched a Policy Unit in Brussels to build bridges with European policy-makers.ⁱⁱ On the other hand, our team sensed an increasing demand from leading social entrepreneurs for more collaborative initiatives. For example, David Lubell (founder of Welcoming America and Welcoming International and Ashoka Fellow), who had scaled his organization across Europe through Hello World's accelerators, when asked about what kind of support he would need for scaling further, said,

Put me in a room with some of the top policy people, migrant leaders, researchers, a few other social entrepreneurs, mayors and some businesses to think about the field as a whole and how to create collective change. That's the way to really scale the needed impact, beyond a geography and beyond a particular organization like mine.ⁱⁱⁱ

Hello World's response came in 2020, designing a process, space, and methodology to enable the collective conversations social entrepreneurs like David demanded. With the support of Zalando, our longstanding innovative partner in innovation (Zalando), we launched the first Hello World Ecosystem Accelerator pilot in 2022.

The core of the Ecosystem Accelerator consists of three phases that take place over one year and a half. First, an Analysis and Mapping phase identifies the topic, defines the scope (thematic and geographically), and maps key stakeholders involved. Around 50 key thought and action leaders are chosen from the stakeholder map to interview in depth to further define the issues underlying the topic. Stakeholder groups generally include leaders from the corporate, public, and academic sectors, policy experts, change leaders from affected communities (in this case, migrant entrepreneurs), and leading social entrepreneurs. Second, we invite a group of 15 to 20 key leaders to the Collaborative Innovation phase, meeting regularly to analyze the sector's problems, identify root causes, and propose areas for intervention. The group produces four outputs: (a) a recommendation paper for all stakeholder groups; (b) a strategy for spreading conclusions to key decision-making spaces (including, importantly, policy, business, and academia); (c) an internal mapping of key innovations solving the issues; (d) a list of potential collaborative solutions to prototype in the next phase. Finally, the Prototyping phase consists of enabling a space for interested participants to build out and test some of the proposed solutions. In addition to the mentioned outputs, an important outcome throughout and beyond the process involves deeper relationships amongst key stakeholders in the sector and further alignment towards common goals, essential ingredients to accelerate impact in an ecosystem.

The pilot produced the expected outputs and sparked relationship-building and alignment among stakeholders. Indeed, two years after the process, collaborative processes continue emerging from the participants, including building a backbone organization or network of networks for migrant entrepreneurs and support organizations, a spin-off of the collaborative process with corporations seeking to improve their ability to identify, recruit and retain migrant talent,^{iv} academic papers and conferences sharing and deepening the recommendations from the Ecosystem Accelerator,^v and requests from other entities to develop similar ecosystem accelerators. Although these results are very preliminary and difficult to measure well yet, they seem to point to success from a multi-stakeholder collaboration perspective, which will produce, in the long term, important opportunities, support, and recognition for entrepreneurs with a migrant background in Europe.

Recently, I asked a couple of participants about their thoughts on the process. Fatemeh Jailani, COO of Singa International and participating Social Entrepreneur highlighted the Ecosystem's success in lessening polarization (even amongst people with similar aims) by providing a common language. She states:

What the accelerator bravely dared to do was, despite our different schools of approach to this topic, align our understanding by forcing us to speak the same language in order to constructively, with open ears and open hearts, discuss the needs of migrant entrepreneurs in Europe.^{vi}

Another social entrepreneur participant, Nicolai Strøm-Olsen, CEO and co-founder of Startup Migrants, celebrated the alignment around common aims:

Everyone knows that to get systematic change, it is important to establish good collaborations between public, private, and social businesses to create workable solutions. The damn thing is that creating these collaborations is very hard. The Accelerator did manage to get people from all the different fields to agree on some root problems and a call for action, and it provided a very good start for systematic change.^{vii}

If we take these statements and preliminary results as indicators of success, it's worth asking the question: what is unique about this model? Our analysis brings out four key factors:

First, we put a social entrepreneur at the helm. In our model, we invite at least one Social Entrepreneur to join our design team and co-facilitate the process. We find that their action-driven personality provides a key ingredient in keeping the accelerator pointed towards impact and 'building' so it doesn't get stuck in long, dry, theoretical conversations. Indeed, our design team often had to "hold back" the group from jumping to ideas to fix problems too quickly before we had analyzed the root causes in depth.

Second, we involve change leaders from the communities affected by the issue addressed in the multi-stakeholder experience. Essentially, the community members pass the same criteria as others, so they do not play a testimony or tokenized role but rather contribute fully. For Ashoka and Hello World, this emerges from our unwavering vision of a world where Everyone is a Changemaker, and, applied to people on the move, "Every Migrant is a Changemaker. Everywhere. All the time." Thus, the more perspectives of activated changemakers we have in a given situation, especially proximate leaders^{viii} creating change from within the community, the more likelihood of developing effective, equitable, and resilient solutions.

The third success element involves building strong criteria for participants and involving them in different levels. We used firm selection criteria for core participants, with an emphasis on changemaking experience and organizational maturity. This allowed them to connect quickly and establish a collaborative environment. Additionally, we designed three involvement levels for the Ecosystem Accelerator to bring in key participants in different ways without having to fulfill all criteria or dedicate intense time: 15-20 leaders who fulfilled all our criteria and committed to deep work (in-person events and bi-weekly virtual meetings over a period of six months), around 50 thought and action leaders who gave input and joined select 'validation session' with feedback on preliminary findings, and over 500 change leaders in the sector who attended one in-person or virtual event to validate findings and discuss recommendations. This enabled very busy leaders to make quick decisions on participating and choose to continue on or not after fulfilling a commitment and not feel like they were being dragged into a lifelong process.

Fourth, we framed the process as an accelerator, with a specific problem in mind, instead of as a general collaborative space, and used a variety of methodologies and tools intersecting systems change acceleration and multi-stakeholder work. Participants noticed the framing nuance, grateful for a problem to solve, as they were weary of long processes that didn't produce action. Indeed, we adapted scaling methodologies and tools to collective impact that

are normally applied to individual organizations and leaders^{ix} and wove into the design and rhythm the strict multi-stakeholder methods, such as our partner, CoCreative's tools and insights,^x or the Theory U journey,^{xi} as well as Design Thinking principles to create deliberate moments to converge or diverge and lean methods to force developing models that can be evaluated externally.^{xii}

Finally, when considering the long-game aim of ongoing, deep multi-stakeholder collaboration, our unique approach was to start with a fairly short-term, topical-specific, product-connected process that didn't ask people to commit for the long term. Indeed, the notion of "acceleration" provokes excitement around doing something now that will spark more change, and this was the aim: get people together that rarely have time, energy, or funds to do this, work on a project together, and in the process build strong relationships and alignment that will outrun the specific experience and funding. Current results point to success in this approach.

Of course, not everything is a success, and as we plan two new ecosystem accelerators to run in 2024-25, a few challenges loom ahead. To begin with, this model requires significant up-front funding for a design and facilitation team with experience in the topic and in working with social entrepreneurs and high-level stakeholders. It requires an organization with deep experience and wide networks in the sector and, adding a second challenge, funders who have the vision and courage to support a process with impact goals that can seem quite abstract compared to typical direct impact numbers of users or "beneficiaries" reached. This requires working closely with multiple partners to develop models to fund systems change.^{xiii} This leads to the challenge of accurately measuring the impact generated: relationships, collaborative conversations, and efforts that emerge from those relationships outside the program are complicated to record, and it is nearly impossible to indicate how much the Ecosystem Accelerator contributed to these precisely. We need better impact measurement models and organizations that can apply them. Finally, for a diverse network organization like Ashoka and Hello World, it is complicated to continually adjust our role to be able to build collaborative efforts but not lead them in the long term. In recent years, we have realized that one of our primary strengths is convening key stakeholders around well-framed topics, but that doesn't mean we must become the backbone structure for ongoing work that emerges from these conversations. Building resilient structures to keep these networks alive is a challenge we must continually solve.

In conclusion, we propose four simple recommendations that emerge from this process for organizations seeking to launch similar processes. First, put an experienced social entrepreneur at the center (and make sure to compensate them for their time!). Their energy and drive to action can be a game-changer for the team. Second, create and be diligent about applying clear criteria to participants, including a desire to collaborate to enable a healthy environment from day one. Third, design different levels of participation with beginning and ending for defined time commitments. This allows more people to participate and take ownership without making a long-term commitment. Finally, consider adapting scaling and systems change methodologies to the group as a way to focus on one problem to solve and build the multi-stakeholder collaboration from that first experience.

Complex problems require collaborative solutions. This statement, thankfully, is increasingly present in the social innovation sector, and many deeply believe in it. However, building these collaborative environments is very difficult. Hello World's model for the Migration

Sector – in many ways a piecing together of existing strategies – is seemingly providing the much-needed spark to build these environments and hopefully achieve long-term results involving resources, support, and recognition of migrants’ changemaking for the good of all around the world.

-
- ⁱ See <https://community.ashoka.org/en> for examples of systematized resources.
- ⁱⁱ See 2020 impact report from Hello World's European team, <https://www.hello-europe.eu/our-impact>). For the policy approach, see also Kenny Clewett, "Case Study 2: Impacting Public Policy Collectively in the Field of Migration in Europe", *Social Innovations Journal Issue 52: Ashoka Edition* (30 November 2018), <https://socialinnovationsjournal.org/editions/issue-52/75-disruptive-innovations/2913-case-study-2-impacting-public-policy-collectively-in-the-field-of-migration-in-europe>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Personal conversation with the author, 2019.
- ^{iv} See Future of Work for a summary of the corporate consortium: <https://www.hello-europe.eu/corporate-changemaking>.
- ^v For example, ecosystem participants Alexandra David and Maria Elo in Judith Terstriep et al., The Role of Local Embeddedness of Transnational Migrant Start-ups in the COVID-19 Crises – Examples from the Berlin Start-up Ecosystem, IAT Discussion Papers (May 2022), <https://doi.org/10.53190/dp/202205>.
- ^{vi} Email correspondence with author, 12/2/24.
- ^{vii} Email correspondence with author, 14/2/24.
- ^{viii} See Angela Jackson, John Kania and Tulaine Montgomery, "Effective Change Requires Proximate Leaders," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (October 2, 2020), https://ssir.org/articles/entry/effective_change_requires_proximate_leaders.
- ^{ix} See, for example Ashoka's Systems Change course (<https://www.ashoka.org/systems-change-masterclass>) with some of these methodologies including the 5R framework, the problem analysis tree or the systems change plot.
- ^x See <https://www.wearecocreative.com>.
- ^{xi} See <https://www.u-school.org/theory-u>.
- ^{xii} For more on Design Thinking, see, for example <https://designthinking.ideo.com/>.
- ^{xiii} See Florian Rutsch, Seven Steps for Funding Systems Change: A Comprehensive Guide for Funders, by Social Entrepreneurs, Ashoka and Community Fund (November 2019), [https://www.ashoka.org/de-story/seven-steps-funding-system-change](https://www.ashoka.org/de/story/seven-steps-funding-system-change).