

**transformative  
social innovation  
theory**

# Ashoka

## TSI Narrative



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## About TRANSIT:

TRANSIT is an international research project that aims to develop a theory of Transformative Social Innovation that is useful to both research and practice. It is co-funded by the European Commission and runs for four years, from 2014 until 2017. The TRANSIT consortium consists of 12 partners across Europe and Latin America. For more information, please visit our website: <http://www.transitsocialinnovation.eu/>.

## About this Document/ Disclaimer:

This report provides a very short summary of a full case-study report that includes in-depth case-studies of Ashoka. Both, the full case reports and this summary, were guided by four empirical research questions based upon a preliminary conceptual framework of the TRANSIT-project. The four questions concern:

1. the overall development of the local cases and the transnational network(ing);
2. how they relate to different types of change and innovation (incl. social innovation, system innovation, game- changers, narratives of change and societal transformation);
3. how actors are empowered and/or disempowered in and by the local cases and the transnational network(ing), including topics such as governance, learning, resourcing and monitoring;
4. what are other relevant emergent issues with regard to understanding the dynamics of transformative social innovation.

This summary document focuses on the first three questions. It presents – in a highly reduced and generalised format – the interpretations of the researchers, and does not necessarily reflect the views and nuances of the initiatives and respondents themselves. For a full account of each transnational network and local case, including interview quotes and expressed nuances by respondents, we refer to the full case report, which is available via [communication.transit@ihs.nl](mailto:communication.transit@ihs.nl). Both the full case report, as well as this summary document, are the basis for future research activities and publications.

## Suggested citation:

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## Ashoka: Innovators for the Public

Ashoka: Innovators for the Public is a not-for profit organisation with local branches currently in 37 countries. The most historic activity of Ashoka is electing and supporting outstanding social entrepreneurs (SEs). The number of these Ashoka Fellows (fellows) exceeded 3000 since the first SE was selected in 1981.

Thus Ashoka is not a network. It is a

- worldwide organisation,
- connected to individuals and through these SEs loosely to their organisations,
- there are further spin-off (for-profit and non-profit) organisations of local Ashoka offices in certain countries.

It is not a network, but there are very strong networking elements though – both locally and internationally, both internally (among the fellows) and externally (with a large pool of private individuals and business organisations that provide a wide variety of resources from expertise and pro bono work to financial support). Ashoka is intricately interwoven with a great number of formal and informal networks. One of the major aims of Ashoka is to connect SEs who are then able to combine their resources and spread their ideas to other countries and fields in order to upscale the original social innovation that finally becomes a ‘pattern changing’ ‘system innovation’. Therefore, organising meetings of local fellows as well as various international programs within Ashoka have soon developed. Currently the following major programs are dedicated to connect fellows in the global arena: The Globalizer Program and The Hub. Developing partnerships and networks of fellows is not the only way. Promoting relationships between SEs and business entrepreneurs is also a major aim and it is also institutionalized via e.g. the Ashoka Support Network (ASN) and corporate long term volunteering at the organizations of fellows.

## 1 Development of Ashoka and two local country offices

Ashoka has 35 years of history, the origins of Ashoka Hungary (AH) go back to 1994; Ashoka Germany (AG) was founded in 2003.

Ashoka is a US-based not-for-profit global organisation, where local operations – country or regional offices – are owned by the central, global organisation. AG is a distinct local office, whereas AH is part of Ashoka Central and Eastern Europe office including 5 countries (Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia), and managed by Ashoka Austria.

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## Overview levels of case-study

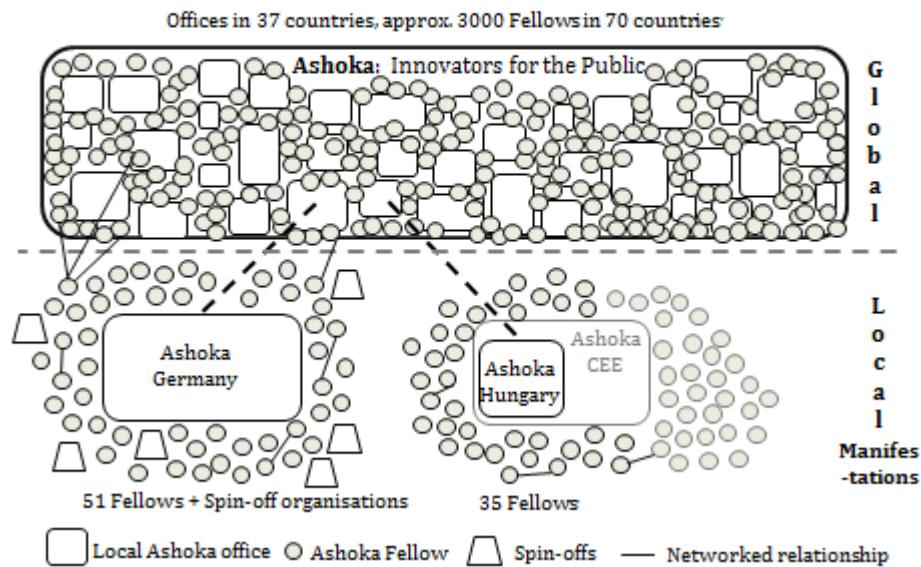


Figure 1: Overview levels of Ashoka

The most historic activity of Ashoka is selecting and supporting Fellows, i.e. leading social entrepreneurs (SEs). This core activity has been enriched with a wide variety of other programmes and initiatives within Ashoka aiming at promoting group entrepreneurship and developing infrastructure for the citizen sector. Formal and informal networking of the individual Fellows has soon become a priority in Ashoka in order to fertilize, synergize and upscale local ideas.

The Fellow oriented activities have been coupled with another distinct stream of initiatives, namely the “everyone a changemaker” idea. Bill Drayton, the founder of Ashoka conceptualised this notion in the mid-2000s, and since then it has become the central theme of the vision of Ashoka, that is: “to advance an Everyone a Changemaker world, where anyone can apply the skills of changemaking to solve complex problems”. Thus, a shift from focusing fundamentally on the prestigious circles of SE-s to opening up to promote the change making potential of non-SEs’ too has taken place.

Looking at the local manifestations we conclude that there is only a limited number of characteristics shared by AH and AG. The similarities are mostly stemming from the organisational procedures applied all over Ashoka. Beyond the contextual elements differences are actually generated by the innovative culture of Ashoka as well. There is a broad room for – and expectation of – local innovative practices developed and provided by not only the fellows but also the staff members (entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs).

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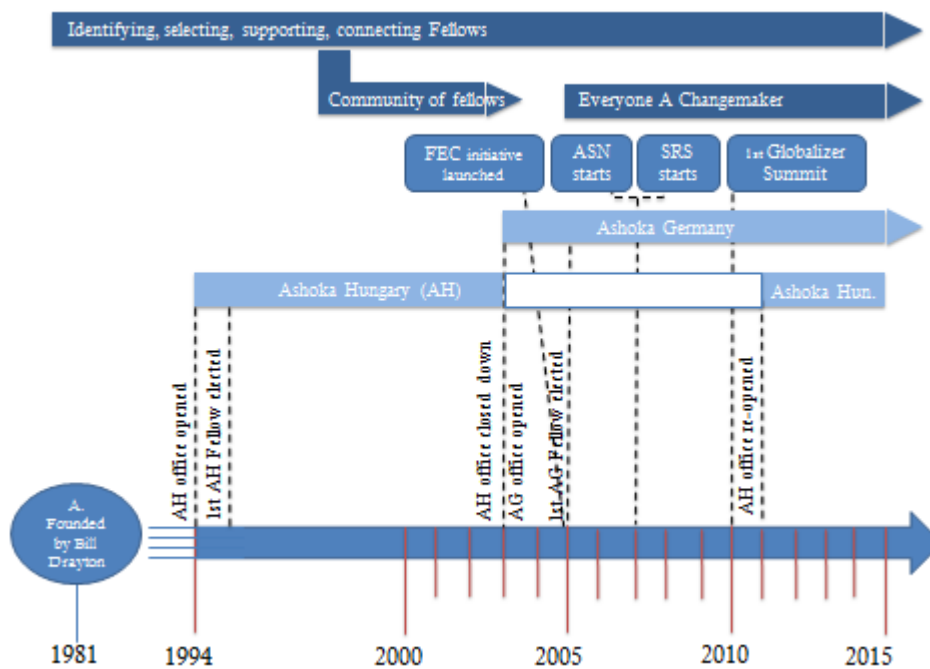


Figure 2: Condensed timeline

## 2 Aspects of innovation and change

The terms pattern change, system change, and structural social change are part of the Ashoka vocabulary from the very early days. System change is what is reiterated in concept papers, Ashoka brochures, and interviews alike.

The fish metaphor describing the Ashoka type SE worded by Bill Drayton (Founder of Ashoka) at a very early stage of the organisation and still quoted in e.g. annual Ashoka fellow profile booklets and on Ashoka websites, captures system change as revolutionizing an industry. "Social entrepreneurs are not content just to give a fish or teach how to fish. They will not rest until they have revolutionized the fishing industry."

System change is "large scale impact through system-change and replication". The ways how system change can be achieved are described by the following 5 major types by Ashoka: (1) redefining interconnections in market systems (market dynamics and value chains); (2) changing the rules that govern our societies (public policy and industry norms); (3) transforming the meaning of private versus citizen sector (business social congruence); (4) fully integrating marginalized populations (full citizenship and empathetic ethics); (5) increasing the number of people who are social problemsolvers (culture of changemaking and social entrepreneurship). Fellows "are changing patterns and transforming systems". The general rule of thumb is "1 in 10 million", reflecting the rarity and particular characteristics of identified and finally elected SE according to five selection criteria: creativity, entrepreneurial quality and ethical

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fiber of the individual, plus the newness and the social impact of his/her idea. Fellows face the requirement of system change at the very beginning of their Ashoka-journey: it is explicitly involved in the selection process already. Potential fellows have to prove in rich details how their idea is going to become a new pattern followed by many, to disrupt existing institutions in order to solve social problems that were created by these institutions. Future upscaling may take the form of e.g. spreading the idea to other geographies or societal fields, changing legislation

Poverty, abuse, corruption and environmental degradation are those wrongs because of what Ashoka wants to generate change. The other reason is the fast changing world, to which the adaptation can only happen by the help of the SEs and changemakers. Three reflections are made on this: what gamechangers and topics are covered in Ashoka?, how change is understood?; and here it worth underlining again how the concept of Ashoka changed to support this adaptation from the exclusive SE focus " to become more inclusive and broader thinking".

Initially Ashoka did not provide a typology of potential social problems to be solved, it was and it is receptive to all kind of issues. However, after a while based on the programmes of the supported fellows "waves" of social issues were identified. Currently there are six broad streams a potential fellow can apply or be nominated to: Civic Participation, Economic Development, Education, Environment, Health, Human Rights.

Change is the most often used, unavoidable word in the language of Ashoka. It is used all over, but when asked about it, no definition or circumscribing is provided. Some say that it is because of the American culture of the organisation: "doing" culture, where a problem arises, active response and change is needed which is perceived as good ultimately. For some of the Ashoka people there is a need for discussion about change. To our understanding it is allegedly and intrinsically good. There is a tacit normative stance behind it. The potential of undesirable, regressive or even oppressive consequences are ignored, even though some of our interviewees were clearly aware of that possibility.

An explanation of the change being positive was provided by the head of AG. According to Felix Oldenburg (2014): "what's good change and what's bad change I don't know; but what I can do is identify individuals that are powerful actors for the good of all and I can help equip more people, especially young people, with the skills to be able to be relevant in that world' we're heading into". All in all, trust in Ashoka fellows, and in the selection process is the implicit assurance. The motivation and the abilities of the individual are understood as examined in details and accepted, thus his/her activity and impacts must be positive as well.

## 3 Aspects of (dis)empowerment

Governance.

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Rigorous structures and freedom of organizing are characterizing Ashoka at the same time. Selection process, programs are highly formalized and centralized providing a universal framework and set of procedures. The epicentre of decisions is the top management and senior team, and there are further management levels mirroring the geographic spread of the organization. As the organisation grows changing formats and management approaches are born (and fade away) - not always fully understood and accepted by all levels of Ashoka. Currently, a “team of teams” approach is created (where staff members of a locality are connected to overall or global programs, activities, topics of Ashoka), and a new hub structure is being established (where hubs are seen more as resource providers, supporters than actual management and control organizations).

Parallely, there is a room for individual initiatives and a high level of local freedom. New programs, organizations created in AG (some of them become global program of Ashoka) are highlighting this opportunity of entrepreneurial activities of the staff and bottom-up initiatives. This freedom is promoted (see long selection process of staff put the entrepreneurial capabilities of the candidates to the test; organizational wisdom saying “it is better to ask for forgiveness than permission”) by Ashoka, and highly appreciated by the staff members. It is also feared by them: there is a perceived uncertainty, and inconvenience stemming from it.

## Resourcing.

The major milestones of the history of the 2 local manifestations as well as their everyday operations reflect the key importance of resources, especially funding. The availability of funding was one of the key – if not the single most important – driver of launching local operations in both cases even if fund raising took place in a completely different manner: one external donor provided funding for several years in AH, country coordinator raised money from local sources for AG. Access to funding has proved to be different in the 2 countries ever since (a ‘continuous struggle’ in AH and an abundance of resources in AG). This reinforces the requirement of entrepreneurial, fund raising capabilities and resourcefulness of local staff, and also sheds light on the limited sensitivity to local context (e.g. the very same minimum limit of donation to become ASN-member in Germany and Hungary). AH was closed down because of lack of funding in 2003, and now it faces that again.

Financial resources prove to be key also when we approach Ashoka from the Fellows’ point of view: the fundamental support provided to them has always been the 3-year stipend. Supporting activities have become much more complex by now: the potential for peer learning in the network of Ashoka Fellows, and the various individual and business consultancies/coaching activities provided by the external network of Ashoka are not just important resources but also central to the self-identification of the organization. Mainstream business consultancy, however, raises the question whether the innovative pattern changer SEs face the risk of being shaped to mainstream business operations and management philosophies.

## Social learning.

The learning opportunity embedded in the peer-to-peer community of Ashoka fellows is a consciously elevated resource: beyond the identification, selection of and support provided to fellows the major activity is to connect them. Fellow meetings (locally, regionally,

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internationally) generate informal, various programs (e.g. The Globalizer) provide a formal way of sharing experiences, building up common knowledge.

Spreading good practices and inspiring stories not only within the community but to the external world has been a strategy in Ashoka. The idea is that the fellow is a hero and a role model who sparks the motivation of others to become SEs themselves, and this ultimately leads to the “everyone a changemaker” world. A whole set of initiatives are promoting the learning of the relevant skills early on (e.g. empathy and team work in the Changemaker Schools); the acceleration of the ever active media presence (social media, business media, etc.) by selecting and educating journalists (Mavens, Storyteller in Residence Program); public speeches and events (e.g. Bill Drayton talks at universities, 7x7 Cocoa Party introducing SEs and SE-qualities to the public).

Brigding between SEs and the business world: When conceptualizing SEship in and around Ashoka in the 1980-90s channelling entrepreneurial spirit and business efficiency/discipline to the citizen sector was in the focus. Learning from businesses (business breakfasts, business consultancy via management firms and individual donors) has always been a key endeavour which – to a certain extent – has become reciprocal: SE-experience is taken to corporations (by e.g. motivational speeches given by fellows at corporate events, corporate executives work in and learn from the organisation of fellows).

## Monitoring.

Ashoka has always been keen on evaluating impacts, thus an annual feedback on the outcomes of the activities of fellows receiving the stipend has been asked for. A survey at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> year of the fellowship asks whether the original work is continuing, the innovation is replicated by other independent organizations, it has influenced or changed national policies. Social Reporting Standard (SRS) is becoming the fundamental form of impact measurement recently: fellows and advanced fellowship candidates are now required to compile a report based on this standard developed by the initiation of and contribution by AG.