

# Ashoka Fellows Change the World

BY DIANA WELLS

WHILE REDUCING THE COST OF SOLAR ENERGY and increasing the income of rural farmers are big problems, these specific problems will be solved and there will be new problems. We live in a time where the numbers and complexity of problems seem to be outracing the numbers of solutions. Ashoka works to increase the numbers of people creating solutions – solutions to all of society’s problems. Ashoka’s vision is a world where “everyone is a changemaker.”

Over the last 30 years, Ashoka: Innovators for the Public has identified and supported more than 2500 leading social entrepreneurs, Ashoka Fellows, in more than 70 countries working

on every imaginable social problem: from Bart Weetjens using rats to detect landmines in Africa to Vineet Rai starting the first social venture fund in India to Albina Ruiz sees an opportunity for a dignified living wage from recycling or repurposing garbage Peru. These Fellows have dramatic (often national and global scale) impact in their specific fields. And yet, as Bill Drayton, who is the founder and current CEO describes it, the biggest impact social entrepreneurs can have is not necessarily their solutions to problems; it is their “recruiting thousands of local changemakers to give their ideas wings in community after community.” In addition, Ashoka has taken what is has learned in sourcing these social entrepreneurs across the globe and applied this learning to sourcing other innovators across



Ashoka Fellow Shaheen Mistri walks with children on a stone walkway in India.

the life-cycle of innovation—whether this is through Ashoka’s Youth Venture program or Ashoka’s Changemakers.net on-line collaborative competitions.

Now after thirty years of work, Ashoka has successfully built a global community distinguished by its attention to system change and ethical entrepreneurial leadership. The knock-out test for electing Ashoka Fellows and for starting new Ashoka initiatives is the same: there needs to be a system change idea in the hands of an entrepreneur. Rather than looking to someone who is building one school or one hospital, Ashoka looks for individuals who are changing the way children learn or the way healthcare is delivered. In other words, rather than investing in incremental innovation, Ashoka thinks the most leveraged way to invest in social innovation is to invest in the people who have system change ideas.

Ashoka defines **system changes** as impact resulting from the social entrepreneurs, ideas and networks we support that affect (or have the potential to affect) large numbers of people. We understand that Ashoka Fellows change systems in five different ways:

- redefining interconnections in market systems (market dynamics and value chains),
- changing the rules that govern our societies (public policy and industrial norms),
- transforming the meaning of private vs. citizen sector (business social congruence),
- fully integrating marginalized populations (full citizenship and empathetic ethics) and
- increasing the number of people who are social problem solvers (culture of changemaking and social entrepreneurship).

How does Ashoka know whether it has changed systems? How do we understand, define and measure changes in a system? Recently we significantly revised our global survey of Ashoka Fellows to tackle these questions. In collaboration with Ashoka’s Corporate Executive Board, we interviewed a sample of Ashoka Fellows (172 Ashoka Fellows) from 31 countries in 10 languages and we found that **83 percent of Fellows (76% five years post election as Fellows) have changed systems at a national level in at least one way.** On average, Fellows change systems in three different ways.

We have learned that Ashoka Fellows change systems primarily through the power of their ideas. Most build organizations to serve as vehicles to advance their ideas and significantly contribute to strengthening the citizen sector. Ashoka Fellows recognize that achieving large-scale change spreads and advances their ideas through complex and diverse networks.

Bill Drayton’s genius, in starting Ashoka, was to recognize that in order to understand where the world is going you must understand early stage innovation as a predictive factor for future trends. Over 30 years Ashoka has built a global network and institution to do just that. We have built a community where these changemakers can learn from and support each other AND PERSIST. From this community we can recognize patterns and together we transform fields, sectors, geographies and the world.

But perhaps most important of all, we know that these individuals inspire others to behave in similar ways. With these many examples in our ever-growing community, we hope to inspire the rest of the world’s citizens to better understand how to most effectively engage in social change and to be effective changemakers. With the ever-increasing rate of change before us, it is now more critical than ever to ensure more individuals are mastering the skills of empathy, teamwork and leadership to be effective changemakers. The only answer to more problems is more problem-solvers. For this reason we believe the only answer is to build a world where all citizens are playing roles to solve the world’s most pressing needs—a world where *everyone is a changemaker.*

Diana Wells is President of Ashoka, and the creator of one of Ashoka’s core programs—Fellowship Support Services. She received her PhD in Anthropology from New York University. She is on the Advisory Board for the Center for the Advancement of Social Entrepreneurship (CASE) at Duke’s Fuqua School of Business and on the Board of GuideStar International.

