NGOs' impact and sphere of influence on different governments' policymaking around the world.

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The article offers the most relevant literature review and a series of spotlights on NGOs which are led by a global network of Ashoka fellows. The author uses the theory of change and presents evidence on how social innovators build and run NGOs to maximize their social impact, scaling their change-making models to the level of governmental policymaking or even beyond. The role of Ashoka as a global non-governmental organization itself is analyzed in terms of identifying, supporting and rooting the social entrepreneurs with their NGOs within the empowering networks. The methodology uses triangulation of data from Ashoka Social Impact Report 2018 and Ashoka Fellows narrative interviews. The results show the scale and strength of NGOs' impact in multiple spheres both directly on polices of national governments and indirectly on international policymaking through exerting market-related pressure for embracing social change. The conclusions focus on the overarching principles and ethical fiber of Ashoka fellows as leaders of their NGOs.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have become very influential actors in both domestic and international policymaking since the last turn of the centuries . International NGOs have played an increasing role in operating and interacting within States and civil society to promote change in domestic policies.

International NGOs are able to make the largest impact due to their size and international image and connections. Domestically, a State can work to obscure or hinder the ability of domestic NGOs or civil society to act. International NGOs, however, have more autonomy in their actions and ability to push for change. This thesis shows that the stronger the international NGO-state relation, the more trust a State has in an NGO, and the larger the impact they are able to make. Additionally, the more active a State's civil society is, the faster international NGOs will be made aware of the issue, and the stronger support base NGOs will have to pressure the government to change their ways. Furthermore, the more accountable international NGOs are, the more trust both States and domestic society will have in international NGOs to do their job effectively (Tortajada 2016)

Non-governmental organizations are groups of individuals or communities voluntarily created by private initiatives that act on a non-profit basis (Charnovitz, 2007) . They are extremely diverse, and while this may be one definition of NGOs, there is no universally accepted definition . NGOs are organized under national law, and act independently of respective governments. The scope of NGO activities may be local, national, or international. NGOs may focus on and self-organize around specific issues, such as education, human rights, environmental protection, or around a broad set of social challenges. NGOs may act as direct providers of goods and services or/and advocate before governments for the interests of citizens who may feel excluded from any form of governance. They additionally play a large role in providing independent information to society. They collect and disseminate information that the public can trust and where it may not be available. Furthermore, they play a fundamental role in creating awareness, educating people, and directing citizens through channels for support.

While NGOs do not enjoy formal decision making rights, they exercise substantial influence over outcomes through their expertise and policy proposals. They aim to influence governments and shape their decisions. Increasingly they have advanced from service providers to major players with the funds and potential to influence policy and institutions. NGOs prepare studies for wide

dissemination, engage the media to influence public opinion, and contribute expertise to governmental delegations[1] . NGOs can adapt quickly and respond to changing needs faster than government organizations. The four most important functions of NGOs are (Dunoff, 2015):

- their ability to set agendas,

- negotiate outcomes,

- confer legitimacy,

- implement solutions citizens need.

Non-governmental organizations help to set agendas by notifying the public and governments of new issues. They identify new policy areas, debate the consequences of policies, and identify aspects that require review and refinement . This provides NGOs an ability to participate in decision making. NGOs negotiate outcomes by offering alternative options for policy outcomes and engage in extensive networking. They are able to confer legitimacy as NGOs' judgments can be decisive in promoting or withholding the public's political support. Furthermore, NGOs make solutions work as they are able to do what the governments cannot or will not do. They are further able to influence domestic policy both directly and indirectly. Directly, NGOs provide information for governments and lobby governmental officials on their policy options. Indirectly, NGOs increase the public awareness of issues through the free press. (Simons, 1998)

The World Bank defines two categories of NGOs: operational and advocacy. 19 Operational NGOs focus on the design and implementation of development-related products. Operational NGOs can further be broken down into three main groups: community based organizations, national organizations, and international organizations. Community based organizations (CBOs) serve a specific population in a defined area. National organizations operate in individual developing countries and international organizations are headquartered in developed countries and carry out operations in developing countries20 . CBOs are different from national and international organizations as they are membership organizations that join together to further their own interests. They can be especially helpful in the domestic arena when NGOs are trying to garner more support and participation from citizens. Advocacy NGOs primarily work to defend or promote a specific cause. These NGOs work to raise awareness and knowledge through various activities such as lobbying and activist events.21 Many NGOs engage in both operational and advocacy purposes (Malena, 1995).

Under democratic systems, it is common to observe NGOs functioning as information providers, lobby groups, agenda setters, and norm generators (Prekash & Gugerty, 2010) . Not only do NGOs collect, disseminate and analyze the information that they receive, but they also spread it throughout the State. The increasing role of the internet makes the sharing of information effortless. Additionally, through the use of the media NGOs are able to disclose their information to the public. NGOs can lobby to influence votes on specific legislation or direction of policy. NGOs attempt to gain governments' recognition and promote the issues that are important to the community they represent and that they feel need to be changed. They seem to be most effective at lobbying when they combine their efforts with other NGOs or civil society23 . Since lobbying focuses on influence and persuasion to gain backing for their policies, joining together with civil society creates a larger base of support and makes it harder for governments to ignore. Additionally, it is easier for NGOs to

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[1] Global Policy Forum. "Global Policy Forum." NGOs and the United Nations, June 1999, www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/176/31440.html. Accessed on 10.07.2021

influence agenda-setting at the domestic level as they can disseminate their ideas and engage the public in demonstration activities to raise the profile of the issues at stake. Thus, there are more opportunities for the NGOs to engage in as they are able to merge their goals with particular State interests to affect domestic negotiations. The most important role that NGOs play at the domestic level, however, is setting norms (Macarchuk, 2018). NGOs are able to influence policy and persuade States to create or amend legislation to effectuate the policy change that the NGO is trying to assure (Anderson, 2009) . Furthermore, domestically NGOs play a critical role in enforcing and promoting compliance with international legal norms. They frequently investigate and publicize State violations of international law in order to shame States and build domestic constituencies for compliance.

NGOs have proven their effectiveness in holding institutions and governments accountable to the public and exposing them to public scrutiny when they fail to do so. However, at times NGOs may also complicate or disrupt the law making process, and some States believe that NGOs take an inappropriate activist tone and do not focus enough on the relevant issues26 . Subsequently, issues have arisen over agenda setting. According to an independent review commissioned by UNAIDS, NGOs have played a more active role in shaping rather than responding to the agenda of meetings27 . This is dangerous as NGOs may be pushing their agenda separately from that of the State. While the intentions of the NGOs may be good, it is important that NGOs bridge their causes with that of the State to ensure that the State will follow through with the policy changes. Additionally, concerns exist over the funding sources of NGOs. NGOs are funded by donors, governments, multilateral agencies, private foundations, or charitable individuals (Townsend, 2004) . NGOs are held accountable by these donors; at the same time, however, NGOs do not always provide full transparency over their funding sources. This creates apprehension as States do not know who is providing NGOs with their funding. They therefore do not know the intentions of the NGO and their donor, which can create tension between a State and NGO

Transparency in this context means a committed, coordinated action toward a plan intended to achieve specific goals set out publicly by NGOs30 . Full disclosure from NGOs about their activities enhances public trust. Greater transparency ensures to the State and community that NGOs are working for the citizens and not for their own power, or that of their donors. A step towards greater transparency was made by some NGOs, as in 2006, the International Non-Governmental Organizations Accountability Charter was established[2]

International NGOs obtain funds from various sources, but those funds do not require that activities undertaken by the international NGOs be approved by the communities they work in (Szporluk, 2009) . A government may, therefore, be more suspicious of NGOs which are highly dependent on foreign funds as they do not know who they represent or their motivation. To build a relationship and confidence with States, international NGOs should disclose their motives so that they can work with the State to impact change. International NGO accountability to civil society is also a key component to ensuring NGO success. International NGOs need to disclose their mission to civil society to establish trust and be held responsible to follow through on their commitments (Kaldor, 2003) . Enhanced transparency also helps NGOs build up public trust, support, and capacity through increased exchanges (Macarchuk, 2018) . Positive perceptions of NGOs are found when the citizens believe that an NGO is working to represent their wants and needs. On the other hand, negative perceptions of NGOs are tied to issues of funding, which may cause society to doubt the intentions of the NGOs180 . When international NGOs gain the trust of civil society they can work together to

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[2] https://accountablenow.org/aboutaccountable-now/ Values and Policies | Accountable Now accessed on: 10.07.2021

impact change, and domestic NGOs can continue the work of international NGOs. This ensures that international NGOs will be held to commit to their objectives.

NGO Advisor, an independent media company based in Geneva[3] in order to showcase the best practices and newest ideas in the sector and highlighting the strongest innovation, impact and governance in the nonprofit sector. Ashoka: Innovators for the Public was ranked number 6 moving up from last year's position at 19. Ashoka is the world's largest collection of social entrepreneurs working in 84 countries around the world. According to NGO Advisor, in the last ten years, NGOs have moved further and further from their origins as charity businesses and expanded into an increasingly diverse range of activities. Nonprofits are investing in social enterprise, cultivating academic expertise, and finding strategic ways to address urgent development crises around the world. The fourth edition highlights the evolving values of the sector as a whole, as nonprofits shift away from older strategies of playing to investors and instead focus on producing tangible results.

According to the NGO Advisor website the NGOs in this year's ranking are more influential, more powerful, and more innovative than ever before. With 89 new entrants to the list, and thus 89 NGOs leaving the list, this edition reflects the broader evolution of the nonprofit sector as well as the issues faced by global civil society from the local level to the transnational level. The company, currently chaired by Jean-Christophe Nothias, works with a team of researchers who evaluate leading organizations with a goal of serving as a lens to bring the transformations of the NGO sector into focus and to magnify the evolving range of nonprofit values.

Ashoka's theory of social change is based on two concepts: "everyone's a changemaker" and "team of teams" orientation. Change-maker is a person who is sensitive to human/environmental needs critical of any form of injustice and responds to uncertainties by creative action. Change-making like creativity can be learnt. Model social entrepreneurs (e.g. Ashoka Fellows) who engage others into development of their novel solution serve at the same time as tutors of disruptive approaches to systemic change, applied creativity, entrepreneurial resourcefulness, impact analyses, courage and ethical fiber/integrity. To become a change-maker one must experience freedom and intrinsic motivation to create value, be supported with basic resources, wise feedback and achieve a level of resilience allowing to face adversity or failure on the way to a successful improvement of life. The most complex challenges (like climate or education itself) must be handled through collective change-making by "team of teams" approach in which every stake holder with a collaborative mindset is a potential expert but needs to find the right community to put her/his resources to the best effect on systems and framework changes.

Ashoka's definition of impact implies all the general social transformations provoked by its beneficiaries rather than only the part of the outcomes that can be attributed to the organization's activities. This is a relatively important difference because all of the expected outcomes might not come from Ashoka's activities and existence. Moreover, when looking at all the definitions of social impact listed by Maas (2014), we see that Ashoka's conception of impact best fits Kaplan's definition (2001): "by social impact we mean the consequences to human populations of any public or private

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[3] NGO Advisor is a Geneva-based independent media organization that produces the Top 500 NGOs, a series of reviews of the best non-profit organizations from around the world. Currently on the fourth edition, NGO Advisor is unique in publishing such a ranking. They combine sound journalism with comprehensive research to highlight innovation, impact, and governance in the nonprofit sector.

actions that alter the ways in which people live, work, play, relate to one another, organize to meet their needs and generally act as a member of society"

Ashoka's Search and Selection process is very different from a pitch to a jury, but rather a collaborative conversation of ideas. The main goal is to test how candidates solve problems and think about change, not what they think.

Ashoka's 3,600 social entrepreneurs have been selected after considering hundreds of thousands and screening tens of thousands. Ashoka elects fellows at an inflection point, only when there is consensus among all those involved at all five stages of selection. The process begins with a nomination by someone who is part of our network. Ashoka's Venture representatives across visit www.ngoadvisor.net.the globe consider thousands of nominations a year. Those people that seem to possess new system changing ideas, an entrepreneurial track record, creative problem solving, the potential for significant impact, and unquestionable ethical fiber are approached. There is significant face-to-face, in-depth interviews and site visits by our national teams. The next stage includes an Ashoka board appointed interviewer from another continent, who can evaluate the system change potential beyond national context. Then a panel of peers who know what it takes to create big change also interview and assess candidates against the same criteria as the previous three steps. The final stage is a review by Ashoka's global board.

In selection of fellows (social innovators) for support and networking as well as for changemakers campus certification at higher education level the following questions and criteria have been tested as good practice by Ashoka:

1. The novelty of ideas for dealing with a social problem and arising uncertainties:

-   Does the change-maker/graduate of changemakers' campus offer new proposition for life improvement to the society departing from the established approaches

-   Do educational programs offer learning opportunities and feedback structures and validation (grading) for generating disruptive innovations

-   Is the proposition original to change-maker's (students) life experiences. Has it emerged from unique personal or collective insights as part of character development? Does it go beyond just professional qualifications or activism emerging from specific strategy to deal with the uncertainty or imbalance in the immediate environment?

2. System/frame improvement

-   Does the changemaker demonstrate an intention to go beyond serving direct beneficiaries and disrupt the entire system to ensure sustainability of his/her proposition

-   Is she/he aware of how to change mindsets, inform and engage the key stakeholders of the systemic improvement

-   Can the changemaker mobilize diverse resources to help the community transform to an upgraded reality

3. Creativity of changemakers

- Is the changemaker playful, has a sense of humor, interested in asking divergent questions and engage in "flow" experiences, fuzzy, not clearly defined tasks, willing to deal with the limited resources and uncertainty to achieve success

- Has the changemaker demonstrated ability to invent original products or ways of solving problems, designing new models, prototypes, services etc.

- Does the changemaker use diverse roles and strategies for generating and implementing new solutions

- Can she/he play a leadership role in setting goals for her/his teams aspiring to the improved version of life

4. Entrepreneurial quality of character

- Does the changemaker go beyond activism aligning the diverse interests (including financial goals) to the chosen mission

- Has the changemaker demonstrated a capacity to marshal all the available resources to one goal, taking risks and using uncertainty and niches in market to gain competitive advantage over similar proposals

5. Social impact

- Has the changemakers got a clear vision of what and who is changed once her/his actions reach a tipping point

- Is she/he able to use transparent indicators of impact to capture the change that has been achieved

- Is the changemaker able to build coalitions, networks, influence policies for a stronger impact

6. Ethical fiber/integrity

- Has the changemaker demonstrated critical thinking and courage to make independent decisions and actions, showing civil or cultural disobedience to continue change-making.

- Is she/he transparent and consistent in describing shared values, principles and actual past actions, partnerships, dependencies etc.

- Does the changemakers identify multiple resources (e.g. support networks, awareness of well-being) for staying resilient in face of adversity and uncertainty

In the survey we asked Fellows "What percentage of your organization's revenue comes from selling products/services?" This question was intended to be a proxy for the type of organization Fellows run -- whether for-profit, nonprofit, or hybrid. Overall, just under one-third of Fellows responded "0 percent" to this question, indicating that they are non-profits. 12 percent of Fellows reported that 100 percent of their revenue comes from selling products/services, indicating that they are either for-profits or have a hybrid model.

On every systems change question in the study, we found that non-profit Fellows reported much higher rates of change. For example, 32 percent of nonprofit Fellows had achieved change in

legislation or public policy compared with just 12 percent of for-profit Fellows. The comparison between these two groups on independent replication was even starker, as seen in the chart below.

While Ashoka has tracked Fellows' ability to influence systems change for more than 20 years (both in terms of changes in policy and laws as well as changes in market dynamics), in 2018 Ashoka began to collect data to investigate whether and how it has had a role in accelerating the impact of its Fellows' ideas. Therefore in the Global Fellows Survey we added questions to measure the impact that Fellows attribute to Ashoka, in addition to 43 qualitative interviews where we delved deeper into our findings from the survey. Ashoka's selection process, which typically lasts between six months to one year, is often cited by Fellows as a key learning experience where they were able to think differently about systems change and have the opportunity to interact with many partners and Fellows in the Ashoka network. When we asked Fellows in the survey whether the selection process had helped them strengthen and articulate their idea, two-thirds of respondents (66 percent) fully agreed with this statement, with more than a quarter (27 percent) agreeing to some extent. The number of those fully agreeing goes up to three-quarters for Africa (75 percent) and MENA (74 percent).

The social entrepreneurs who become Ashoka Fellows are leaders who recognize the need to give up control over their idea to see it spread. They are resilient and adaptive to change; the majority of Fellows practice a type of leadership that is transitional and non-hierarchical. In the interviews, Fellows confirmed that they lead by giving up power rather than consolidating it. Many Fellows voiced the opinion that their mission was to spread their idea so effectively that they themselves would no longer be necessary to solving the problem.

To understand whether Ashoka had any influence on Fellows' leadership or thinking on systems change, in the survey we asked Fellows whether as a result of Ashoka they had changed how they think about systems change or how they practice leadership. When asked whether Ashoka has helped them see their work at a system change level, 86 percent responded positively. We went on to ask those who saw their work differently whether their strategy had changed as a consequence of this new perspective: 92 percent confirmed they had indeed fully or partly changed their strategy.

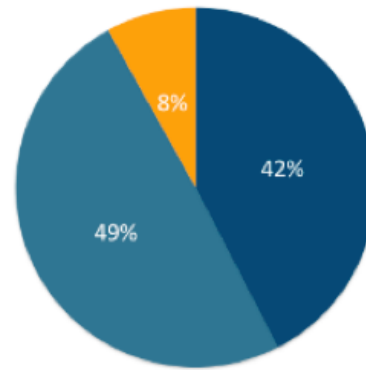## Has Ashoka helped you see your work at a systems-change level?

■ Yes (51%) ■ To some extent (35%) ■ No (14%)

14%
51%
35%
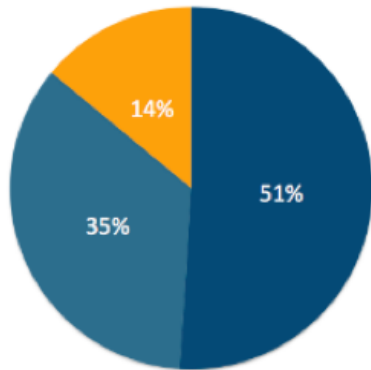
N = 818

As a result, have you made changes to your strategy?

■ Yes (42%) ■ To some extent (49%) ■ No (8%)

8%
42%
49%

N = 695

86% report that Ashoka helped them see their work at a systems-change level, and of those Fellows, 92% made changes to their strategy as a result

Fellows were also asked directly whether Ashoka has helped them increase their impact. 84 percent confirmed that Ashoka helped them increase their impact, with seven percent not sure about it, and nine percent who said it didn't.

Based on the Global Fellows Study results, not only do we now have evidence that Ashoka's selection process strengthens the ideas of its fellows, but that the Ashoka Fellowship contributes significantly to systemic thinking and leadership qualities of its Fellows, with the consequences that many of them change their strategies accordingly. A majority of Fellows confirm that this helped them increase the impact of their work.

While the Venture process (the search and selection of new Ashoka Fellows) is standardized across the globe, how recently elected and existing Fellows are supported varies greatly depending on the local context of each country, the presence and size of Ashoka staff, as well as the organizations accompanying social entrepreneurs and the maturity of the social entrepreneurship ecosystem. For this reason, we asked social entrepreneurs what kind of help they have received from Ashoka and by which members of this global network.
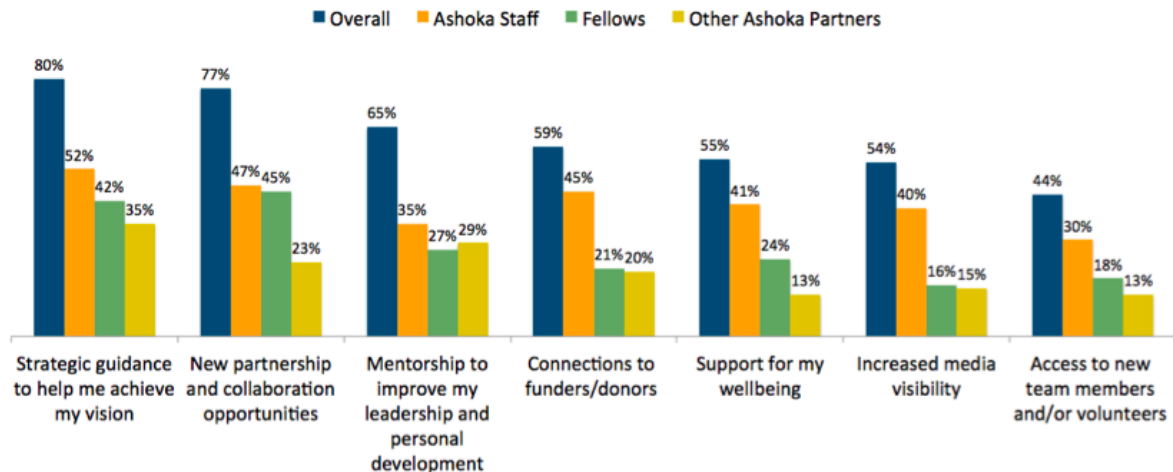
As visualized in the chart above, the most common type of support is strategic guidance (80 percent) as well as the creation of new partnerships (77 percent). Two-thirds of Fellows mentioned mentorship to improve their leadership (65 percent). More than half claim that Ashoka has created new funding opportunities (59 percent), helped them to focus on their wellbeing (55 percent), or increased their media visibility (54 percent). A South Asian fellow tells us that:

"Ashoka helped me to connect with the right people who provided mentorship. They connected me with media houses. Ashoka really raised my profile to high-level people. I was able to access international forums on climate-related issues."

In each of these subcategories, Ashoka staff tends to be the most significant source of help, followed closely by other Ashoka Fellows. Indeed, Fellows report a structured collaboration or partnership with an average of 4.1 other fellows, with seven percent of them collaborating with 10 or more Fellows. Mentorship and strategic guidance are often delivered by external partners engaged by Ashoka.

All Fellows in the global network receive mentorship, strategic guidance, connection to funders and media as well as support to their wellbeing. This helps most of them to see the critical social or environmental problem they are trying to tackle in systems change terms and many of them change their strategy accordingly. The guidance received by Ashoka staff, by other Fellows and external allies also contributes to how Fellows perceive themselves as leaders.

Our findings strongly indicate that Ashoka has a valuable role in accelerating Fellows' social impact that positively improves policy and market dynamics. We find that Ashoka has been able to bring to the surface ideas that may otherwise have been lost or remained confined locally. Fellows also report that Ashoka plays a role in validating their ideas and work by confirming that they are on the right track. We look forward to conducting more research in the future to gain a more in-depth understanding of Ashoka's impact, and how we accelerate the impact of our Fellows.

Former Ashoka employees Jon McPhedran Waitzer and Roshan Paul have written extensively about the inherent contradictions and challenges in social impact-oriented organizations adopting business scaling strategies. They argue that systems-changing social entrepreneurs "let loose a well-defined idea to create a movement or mission-aligned ecosystem, rather than only growing the organization behind it."[4]

Because Fellows see "scale" in terms of how deeply an idea spreads rather than as an increase in employees or direct beneficiaries, they often pursue distinct systems strategies. Achieving "scale" means changing market systems by shifting societal narratives and how people think, rather than just what they buy. And it means challenging existing power structures to make space for everyone to be an active participant in social change. Whether Fellows' ideas spread through open-sourcing, social franchising, licensing, training other institutions to copy their model, or strategic partnerships with government, the end result is the same. In sharp contrast to most for-profit entrepreneurs, systems-changing social entrepreneurs are willing to relinquish control and ownership of their idea in order to see it spread as far as possible.

Ashoka Fellows know that in order to spread their idea quickly and turn it into society's *new normal,* they must employ innovative strategies to get their idea into the hands of as many people as possible. Independent replication is one indicator Ashoka has consistently used to measure Fellows' "idea spread." We define independent replication as a partnership with another organization or institution that takes on a Fellows' idea and brings it to even larger scale and indirect impact. Independent replication can happen through strategic partnerships, licensing, or open-sourcing, among other strategies.[6] With the advent of new technologies and digital tools, it is becoming easier for social entrepreneurs to make their idea accessible and easily replicable.

Since becoming an Ashoka Fellow, has your idea been replicated by independent groups or institutions?
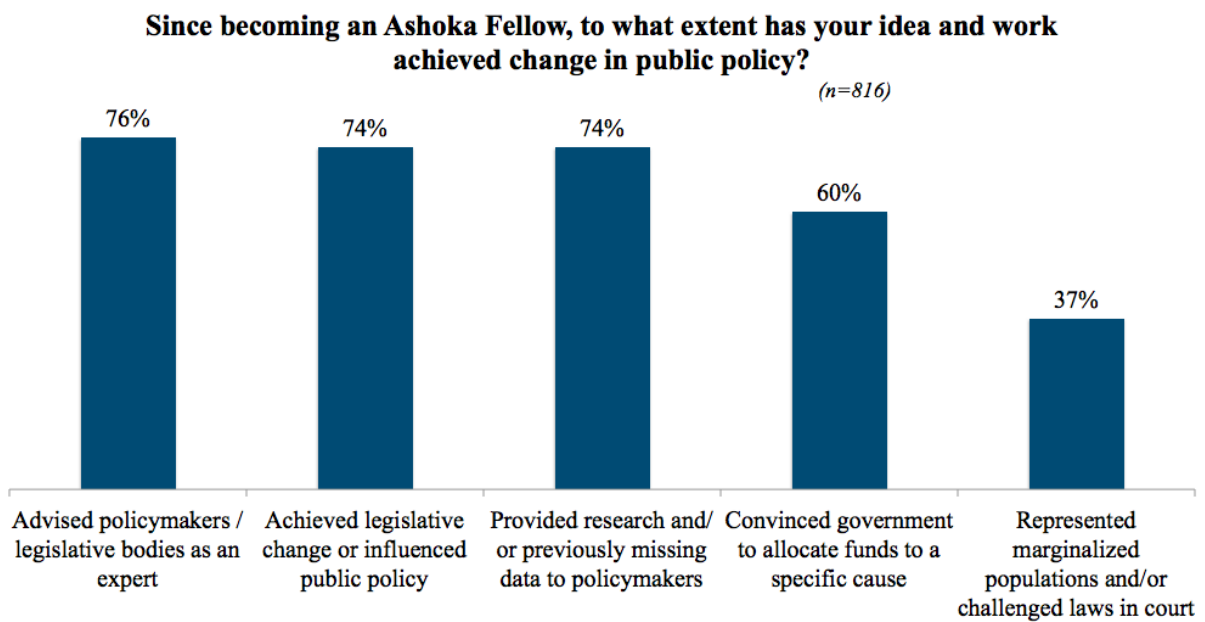
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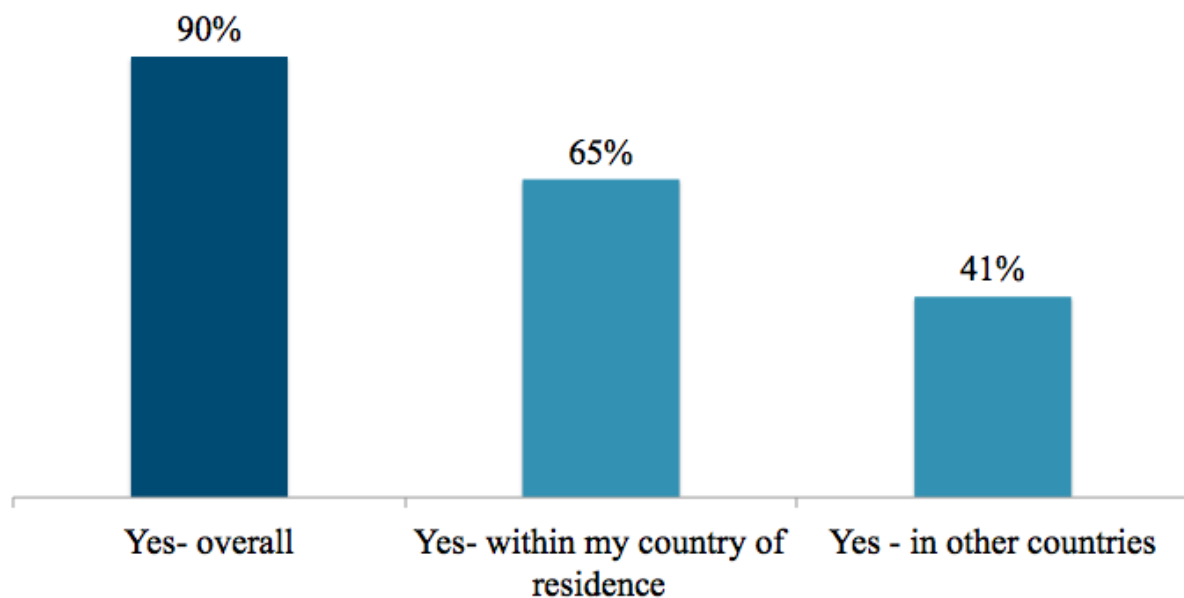
90 percent of Ashoka Fellows have seen their idea replicated by an independent group whether at an international or national level. During interviews, Fellows told us that they viewed independent replication as key to their strategy for social change, although it often took them several years of trying and failing on their own before they realized they needed to give up "control" over their idea in order to scale it.

The term "policy change," often brings to mind the most well-known end result: legislation. Indeed, new or modified legislation can have widespread and long-term social impact -- for instance, due in

large part to Fellow Akkai Padmashali's tireless advocacy for transgender rights, Karnataka state in India has passed the first civil rights bill for transgender individuals that will impact an estimated 400,000 people in the state with legal protections from discrimination.

However, in addition to new legislation, Ashoka measured several other "targeted systems change" strategies for policy change in the 2018 Global Fellows Study. Especially for Fellows living in countries prone to political corruption and high attrition rates of government officials, legislative change may not be the most feasible or sustainable solution. Other strategies that Fellows employ to change public policy include representing marginalized populations or challenging laws in court, convincing governments to allocate funding to a specific cause, advising policymakers as an expert, or providing research/previously missing data to policymakers. All of these strategies can be thought of as subsets of the overall category of "policy change."

Since becoming an Ashoka Fellow, to what extent has your idea and work achieved change in public policy?
(n=816)

| Advised policymakers / legislative bodies as an expert	Achieved legislative change or influenced public policy	Provided research and/ or previously missing data to policymakers	Convinced government to allocate funds to a specific cause	Represented marginalized populations and/or challenged laws in court
76%	74%	74%	60%	37%

When we look at the data by election period, a new trend emerges: rates of **international-level** systems change have been increasing over time for policy change, markets change, and replication. This increase is particularly pronounced because Fellows elected more recently, by definition, have had less time than their peers to create systems change.

The shorter timespan makes this find all the more striking: Fellows elected in the past five years are already reporting **the same** levels of international-level systems change as Fellows elected in the 1980s and 1990s. For most measures of social impact we would expect that Fellows elected more recently would have lower rates of systems change, simply because it takes time to achieve.

International-Level Policy Change Response by Period of Election to Ashoka Fellowship

(n=816)
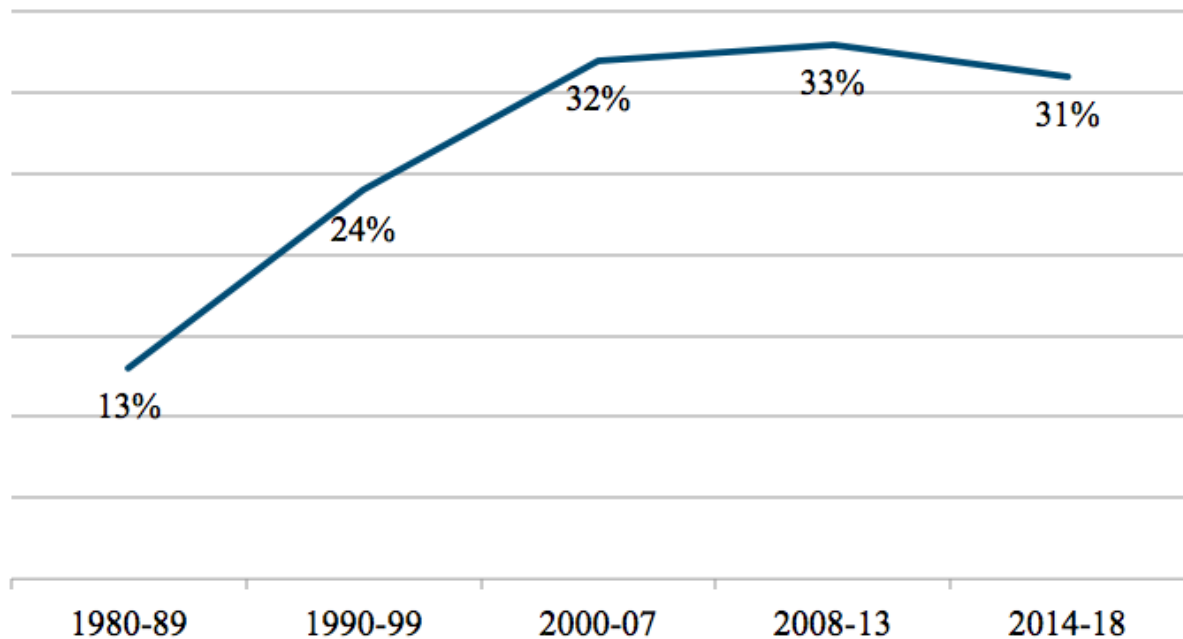
More research is needed to understand this phenomenon, but one hypothesis is that globalization and new digital tools like Facebook and Skype may be assisting Fellows in increasing their rate of international change. Other hypotheses include network effects from other Fellows and from the social entrepreneurship sector more broadly as it has continued to evolve from the 1980s.

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