



# DOING DEMOCRACY

HOW SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS  
BRIDGE DIVIDES, FIGHT APATHY AND  
STRENGTHEN CIVIL LIBERTIES



**ASHOKA**

Everyone a changemaker

For Ashoka, the goal of social entrepreneurship is to make everyone a changemaker, ensuring that everyone can fulfil their potential and embody social transformation through the qualities of agency and empathy.

The next developments in our democratic systems require a focus on community life and the power of citizens, unlocking each person's ability to shape their own surroundings. Citizens themselves can ultimately decide in which direction European democracies develop, and it is essential that they become fully engaged in identifying solutions. Ashoka supports Fellows working towards this purpose, building a world in which everyone can truly become a changemaker.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There are fewer healthy democracies today than there were a decade ago.<sup>1</sup> Populism, extremist movements, low engagement of citizens in representative democracy, and shrinking civic and media liberties are emerging around the world.<sup>2</sup> Engagement with democratic systems and how to improve them must be rethought.

Social entrepreneurs are well suited to this challenge since they address problems in innovative ways that question current social dynamics, visualise the way forward, and directly pursue the future. Our analysis of 25 leading social entrepreneurs across Europe revealed seven strategies through which democratic systems can reach new levels of development. As citizens, professionals, and thinkers we can all make use of these strategies and join the efforts to:

1. Make politics engaging and relatable;
2. Foster offline engagement through online tools;
3. Bring unlikely allies together;
4. Leverage the power of networks;
5. Shift power relations;
6. Tap into citizens' skills and expertise;
7. Use research as a basis for reflection and action.

At the core of the work of Ashoka Fellows is the insight that democracy is a skill that must be strengthened and used daily. Individuals, funders, civil society organisations, public agencies, and businesses must ensure that we organise our daily work around democratic principles, and that we empower everyone around us as citizens.

- Civil society organisations must focus on reshaping social power relations, bring wide varieties of groups and stakeholders together, and codevelop solutions with communities.
- The public sector must approach global issues from a local perspective to make them relatable; it must put all communities at the centre of all levels of policymaking.
- Funders must promote transparency by making their data publicly available and collaborating with civic projects directly addressing democratic challenges.
- Individuals must participate in active democratic engagement by seeking out issues they care about, attending debates, events, and sharing skills.

We can all “do democracy” where we are, with the people around us. Let’s get to work!

I believe we are in radical times, and right now we need radical voices.

Ruth Ibegbuna, The Roots Programme<sup>3</sup>



I want to live in more just, ecological and democratic spaces: from the flat I'm living in to the office where I'm working; from my street to my neighbour, my local park, my city and beyond.

Yaşar Adanali, Beyond Istanbul<sup>4</sup>



We want to make the case that in all regions of the world there's a desire to participate in politics with ideas and new solutions.

Nicola Forster, Foraus



Engagement is to overcome fears, to push boundaries, to create possibilities which we hadn't thought before.

Anne Charpy, Voisin Malin<sup>5</sup>



I think that if we want the world to be more beautiful and kind then our activism must be beautiful, kind and just.

Sarah Corbett, Craftivism Collective<sup>6</sup>



# DEMOCRACY AT A CROSSROADS

“Democracy is not a noun, but a verb: it only happens if we do it.”

The School of Public Life, programme participant

All around the world, democracy is showing signs of wear. Intensive polarisation, political apathy, and other democratic challenges of the 21st-century are calling for a renovation of what it means to participate in the public arena. According to many observers,<sup>7</sup> democratic models that had been on the rise in previous decades are now challenged by new political divides, economic instability and demographic changes, reflecting the need for updated institutions and new forms of collaboration.

The rise of populist movements, the weakening of civil liberties,<sup>8</sup> and general distrust in political institutions<sup>9</sup> are symptomatic of the decline of worldwide freedom and the consequent retreat of global democracy.<sup>10</sup> In Europe, different versions of these global challenges are occurring in a variety of local contexts, reaching both established democracies and more recent ones.<sup>11</sup> Pressures unfolding in the continent have been at the forefront of the public debate, exemplified by the Brexit process in the UK,<sup>12</sup> the rise of far-right movements in countries such as Germany, France and Italy,<sup>13</sup> the challenges facing democratic institutions in Hungary and Poland,<sup>14</sup> and restrictions on civil society and media freedom.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, throughout the continent we experience decreasing election turnout, declining party and trade union membership, which were also documented as indicators of weakened democratic systems.<sup>16</sup>

There are different methodologies to measure the global state of democracy, but established indexes point to a process of dual erosion in terms of the quantity and quality of democracies: there are fewer democracies, and once resilient ones are becoming less democratic.<sup>17</sup> In Europe, evidence shows that people are becoming more open to non-democratic forms of government.<sup>18</sup> Democracies have a changing nature and are shaped by local contexts, but trends towards populism, authoritarianism, and the pressures on civil liberties are observable features across the world.<sup>19</sup>

Many people feel powerless today. They sense that the system is against them — and they are actually right. Most of the meetings between decision-makers and external actors are with companies or corporations. Where are the citizens?

Alberto Alemanno, *The Good Lobby*<sup>20</sup>



Fortunately, this new environment has triggered a strong response from sectors of civil society, as seen in the high election turnout for the European Parliament in 2019 — the highest in the past 20 years<sup>21</sup> — and in the work of social organisations that are developing solutions to strengthen democracy in this new context. This is also confirmed by key reports, such as the Democratic Index of 2018, that revealed a considerable rise in political participation in most of the world amidst unseen levels of disillusion with political institutions. Frustration is turning into action: people are voting and protesting, the participation of women reached the highest levels of the decade,<sup>22</sup> and indicators point to a general desire to reshape the political system.<sup>23</sup>

In many places, democracy is being threatened and there are more authoritarian governments but also this often gives rise to more democratic desires, actions, and practices.

Éva-Tessza Udvarhelyi, *The School of Public Life*



Social entrepreneurs directly contribute to developing new avenues of action and reposition citizens in the centre of change processes. This study investigates the strategies of 25 organisations founded by Ashoka Fellows in European countries from 2013 to 2019 to strengthen civic participation and address local, regional, and global challenges.<sup>24</sup> This diverse group of social entrepreneurs are dedicated to a variety of areas that have direct impact on democracy, such as fighting against the spread of fake news, creating inclusive forms of activism, investigating public spending and international fraud, and engaging communities in advocacy processes. They also work in a variety of political contexts across and beyond Europe, from countries with direct democratic institutions to young democracies and even conflict areas. These organisations share a potent commonality: they distribute the power of engagement throughout society, across different groups, and to each citizen.

Our analysis of these organisations and interviews with eight Fellows revealed that democracy needs to become more approachable and relatable, that every stakeholder can take meaningful action individually and collectively, and that citizens need to engage in overcoming current challenges. The analysis also shows that democratic processes and systems only function by fostering social connections that lead to more cooperation, and by equipping everyone with the information and skills needed to identify issues, advocate for solutions, and keep stakeholders accountable. Strong institutional arrangements that ensure the implementation of rule of law, judicial independence, freedom of expression, and the protection of human rights are at the core of resilient democracies. However,

these are not merely top-down processes: the involvement of citizens in the public sphere is equally important to ensure the stability of the broader political system and its formal institutions.



If people don't take their place at the table, they will always be on the menu.

Michael Sani, Bite the Ballot

The following sections provide an overview of the strategies used by Ashoka social entrepreneurs to strengthen democracy. In each section, you will find one strategy derived from our analysis and two examples of how this is done by Ashoka innovators. Each section also includes recommendations for other organisations based on what we learned from the strategies analysed. A complete list of Ashoka Fellows analysed in the study and their organisations is included at the end of the study.

## THROUGH THIS STUDY WE INVITE YOU TO



Get inspiration from the strategies that emerged from our analysis.



Discover the strategies that Ashoka Fellows employ in advancing democracies throughout Europe.



Explore concrete examples of organisations' innovative work.



Spot concrete next steps that you can take to your organisation to contribute to these efforts.



**STRATEGY 1**  
**MAKE POLITICS**  
**MORE ENGAGING**  
**AND RELATABLE**

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There is a gap between politics and citizens when political decisions are taken top-down. One key challenge identified by Ashoka Fellows is that politics is too removed from people, which leads to feelings of powerlessness, apathy, and frustration.

Ashoka innovators reshape democratic engagement by reframing politics as an everyday action that every individual can engage with, moving beyond conventional forms of political engagement such as voting. Many of the interviewed Fellows stressed that democracy is a skill to be continuously practiced. Social entrepreneurs make explicit the connections between political topics and everyday life by transforming abstract political issues into relatable, concrete matters. They support citizens and communities with the skills, networks, and tools to become actively engaged in designing and advocating for solutions to issues relevant to their lived experience.

If we really want to live in a democracy, we must operate it; we must use these institutions, we must put pressure on them. Democracy is not something that is outside, and we use it and enjoy it as a service, but it must be something that we embody and live in our everyday lives.

Éva-Tessza Udvarhelyi,  
The School of Public Life

Ashoka entrepreneurs also focus on the needs of local communities by breaking down big issues — such as peacebuilding and extremism — into

## CALL TO ACTION



### **Break it down to build it up.**

Engage people in global challenges by breaking down complexities into local issues that they can directly relate to. Make explicit the connection of everyday events and actions to global phenomena.



### **Keep it simple, but don't oversimplify.**

Complexity is an inherent part of any social problem and quick fixes don't exist. Make sure you address this when engaging your customers as a business, your constituents as a civil servant, or your beneficiaries as a civil society organisation.



### **Ensure everyone, everyday practices democracy.**

Reach out to your customers, constituents, beneficiaries and engage them in your projects and initiatives. This will increase community cohesion, help them understand your motivations and plans, and positively contribute to them. Democracy is an everyday process that all members of society contribute to.

community experiences that citizens can relate to and take practical action (see [Build Up](#), [IBS](#), [Women without Borders](#)). Through the Fellows' work, citizens gain a deep understanding of and are encouraged to actively engage with the matters that most affect them. This engagement may take the form of participatory research, policy

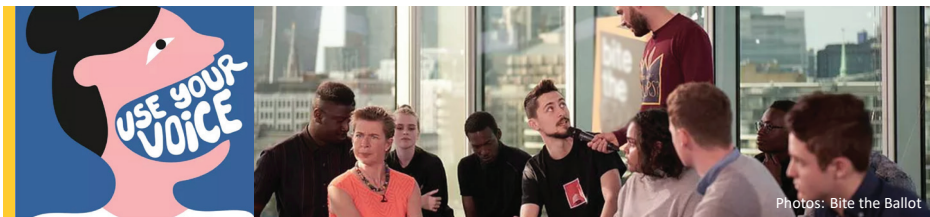
formulation, advocacy processes, local coordinated actions, and constructive debates (see [The School of Public Life](#), [RECLAIM](#), [The Good Lobby](#)). Making politics engaging and approachable means to make explicit the power of citizens to act in tackling everyday issues that translate into political change.

## KEEP IT SIMPLE, PERSONAL, AND FUN

Founded by Michael Sani in the UK, the core purpose of [Bite the Ballot](#) is to bring political engagement into young people's lives through a mediated debate of what matters to them. This means reaching young people where they are – from schools to social media – and demonstrating how political their concerns are. For Michael Sani, political engagement needs to be grounded. This is a matter of language: instead of discussing government politics, he proposes debating everyday issues. This approach brings together those who are affected by the same issues and introduces them to the idea that their own lived experiences are key for designing optimal solutions.

Serious work can't always be serious, because we are talking about a young generation, probably the most stressed at this age than many of us before, especially in a post-war society in Europe. I don't think fear and heaviness is going to win them. We can't talk about a problem; it must be a solution.

Michael Sani, [Bite the Ballot](#)



Bite the Ballot has a four-step approach. The first step is to create meaningful initial engagement by encouraging young people to understand their own power and to identify the issues they care about, which are intrinsically political. The second step is to promote engagement among those who care about the same topics and to assess perceptions of their similarities and differences, positioning each person as part of a collective. These first two steps are facilitated by interactive digital games – used by over 500 schools in the UK. While technology is crucial to facilitate initial engagement and to produce relevant data, the third step of the strategy is to

pivot these discussions into face-to-face interactions by bringing people together in coffee houses where a facilitator encourages the debate of selected topics during a social event. The final step is advocacy, achieved by mobilising youth to participate in grassroots movements while also mobilising key decision-makers to act on key issues.

## GENTLE ACTIVISM FOR ALL

Also in the UK, Sarah Corbett's [Craftivist Collective](#) explores a different way of making politics approachable. The organisation's strategy uses craft as a form of political engagement. Craftivism is especially adept at engaging individuals who feel the urge to contribute to a certain cause but are not aligned with more incisive and loud forms of political action. It is also a powerful tool for campaigning groups and organisations who want to diversify their work.

We know that Martin Luther King had a dream—he didn't have a complaint. It was that dream that kept him going and he also encouraged people of all sides to join that dream, so everybody can be part of the solution.

### Sarah Corbett, Craftivist Collective

The Craftivist Collective promotes workshops and offers online toolkits that can be used by anyone, anywhere, thereby creating a global community. A craftivist could spread a message across public spaces, embroider a thoughtful phrase in a handkerchief reminding a politician of his or her responsibilities, or use a wearable craft to start a conversation about climate change with friends and family. Craftivism has also been used by international organisations to pressure political actions. The World Wildlife Fund, for instance, used a Craftivism Collective project to stop the Spanish government and UNESCO from dredging a heritage site.



At the core of its strategy is intentionality for each project. Sarah encourages activists to think carefully about the issue at hand, the context, the affected people, the relevant decision-makers, and how craft could be effectively used. Craftivism is also about the benefits of the process itself: while engaging in a Craftivism project, people process their emotions related to political issues and convert them into positive action.

STRATEGY 2  
**FOSTER OFFLINE  
ENGAGEMENT THROUGH  
ONLINE TOOLS**

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Ashoka Fellows working on strengthening democracy underline the importance of in-person connections. Many organisations facilitate and create spaces for people to meet and talk, stressing that personal encounters are the atom of democratic life. They provide individuals and communities with the opportunity to restore empathy and find solutions to local issues by nurturing the revival of everyday civic engagement.

If there is hope, it's in meeting people face to face, where you can use empathy to talk to each other. The technology and luxury tools we have are not enough: democracy is built organically and on a face to face level. It takes time but it's a solid foundation, I hope we have enough time.

Jakub (Kuba) Wygnański,  
Stocznia

At the same time, social entrepreneurs are pioneers in creating and using technology for accelerating democratic processes. They employ both hardware equipment, such as micro-cameras, and software solutions, such as apps or online platforms. Some innovators create civic tech platforms themselves, while others use existing ones such as Facebook and Twitter to broaden their reach. Fellows use technology as a tool to connect people and communities, to broaden participation, and to increase accountability of public institutions towards citizens.

## CALL TO ACTION



### **Kick it offline.**

Use in-person meetings to foster empathy, social interaction, and to discuss public-interest issues and decisions affecting the community. Listen and encourage people to express their concerns and points of view. Incorporate these in future actions — whether in a new product as a business, new policies as a civil servant, or new projects as a civil society organisation.



### **Keep people on with online tools.**

Use digital tools to increase reach and keep people connected between offline meetings. Keep in mind that online tools shouldn't replace in-person interaction, which remains at the core of democratic dynamics.



### **Use what's already there.**

Using already-existing tools focused on supporting online participation and the expertise of organisations focusing on civic technology ensures a more dynamic and results-oriented exchange.

The work of some Fellows is only made possible by technology. This is the case for organisations creating online networks that investigate privacy rights, public spending, international corruption, and internet blackouts caused by anti-democratic governments (see [Panoptikon Foundation](#), [OCCRP](#), [NetBlocks](#), [zIndex](#)). Other Fellows stress the personal component in their work with little or no use of digital tools.

However, what we find in most of the approaches of Ashoka entrepreneurs is a combination of online and offline –

and the use of technology as a tool, not as an end in itself (see [Videre](#), [Teyit.org](#), [MakeSense](#), [The School of Public Life](#), [The Good Lobby](#), [Bite the Ballot](#), [Adim Adim](#)). Ashoka Fellows highlight that the use of technology complements direct connections between people, but it cannot fully replace direct connections. Thus, the enthusiasm around the role of technology to develop democracies should not overlook the still essential channels of citizens directly relating to each other, their communities, and representatives.

For us, the online is key to reach out and to organise but it is not really the game changer. To make things happen we need to bring people together, so the online and the offline are not clearly separated in our work. We tend to prioritise and to humanise our relationships in our work, but we need to use the technical component, the online component as a support, as a tool.

Alberto Alemanno, [The Good Lobby](#)

## MEETING THE NEIGHBOURS

While technology can be a unique tool to increase reach in certain contexts, Anne Charpy realised that the best way to reach some of the most disadvantaged and underserved urban districts in France was through simple door-to-door interactions. [Voisin Malin](#)'s strategy is entirely based on the power of in-person connections and neighbourhood networks. The organisation identifies and trains certain neighbours who are inclined to help and connect their communities, who



Photos: Voisin Malin



have a dynamic and charismatic form of engagement, and turn them into a point of connection between communities and public service providers.

Voisin Malin mobilises the resources offered by public institutions and public utility companies and creates a strong communication network to inform the community on how to better use these services, learn how providers can improve their offering, and help neighbours with their demands. As a result, education, health, transport, and other services are improved and every inhabitant is invited to take an active part in community life.

## TECH FOR PEACE

Peacebuilding processes are typically top-down negotiations led by international bodies, in which the voices of the affected communities tend to remain unheard. Founded by Helena Puig Larrauri, [Build Up](#) combines peacebuilding participation and technology to address the needs and challenges of communities dealing with conflict. The organisation democratises peace processes by working with a network of grassroots peacebuilders, technologists, and international organisations to develop creative ways to bring communities together and build shared narratives.

We believe that the key thing that technology does is broaden participation in peace building processes so that really what they become are civic engagement processes to deal with conflict.

Helena Puig Larrauri, Build Up<sup>25</sup>



Build Up identifies grassroots partners through an annual call for applications and co-creates a project that makes positive use of technology and online tools, such as counteracting online displays of intolerance and violence. Communities in Central Africa learned how to make and share impactful videos on their views about cross-border agreements, which brought together their broader community and informed international donors. Syrian youth are leading a TV programme to break stereotypes between communities, while children are learning about peaceful coexistence through a digital game. These and other initiatives are shared in an annual conference led by the organisation that shows how technology can improve everyday life interactions in conflict areas.



STRATEGY 3

**BRING UNLIKELY  
ALLIES TOGETHER**

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The intense polarisation characterising current global politics prevents dialogue, weakens democracy, and paves the way for authoritarianism. Polarisation strategies might originate among political elites to mobilise voters in times of economic instability, but its effects quickly flow into everyday social interactions.<sup>26</sup>

The biggest problem with democracy is on an individual level. If you internally are not ready to respect other people and admit their existence, it's very hard to build anything. Before you start to talk, you must learn how to listen.

Jakub (Kuba) Wygnański,  
Stocznia

Fellows working to strengthen democracy combat this trend by creating new connections between diverse groups of people and social spheres. They connect youth with high-level decision makers, global governance bodies with lay citizens, and different professional categories that normally would not engage with each other (see [OCCRP](#), [Maldita](#), [Bite the Ballot](#), [RECLAIM](#), [Teyit.org](#)). Bringing unlikely allies together means to increase understanding, empathy, and alignment around common goals. Understanding and relating to others' perspectives makes different ideas feel less foreign. Such interactions can expose common grounds and facilitate the emergence of collective action.

Other organisations focus on creating connections between different groups to enable the use and the exchange of different skills and capabilities to

## CALL TO ACTION



### **Make unusual usual.**

Connect with people applying unusual solutions or who you wouldn't normally connect to your issues in order to expand your thinking.



### **Build movements, not barriers.**

Actively include different economic and social groups by supporting diverse local activities, involving diverse people in collaborative processes, and mediating in decision-making processes between different social stakeholders.



### **Collaborate with everyone.**

Promoting regular contact between your organisational boards, leadership, partners, investors, and shareholders with your target groups, customers, and beneficiaries will help clarify different perspectives on the activity of your organisation and commitment to common goals.



### **Think small for big impact.**

Attend debates, events, and projects from grassroots organisations to build awareness of how social problems are experienced and discussed in smaller settings.

tackle a common issue. These groups understand that the best solutions sometimes come from unexpected places and collaborations. This approach positions diversity at the centre of democratic solutions by seeing every stakeholder as an integral part of the solution.

As one of the main concerns around current democratic developments has been the lack of collaboration

and understanding between different groups of citizens,<sup>27</sup> the work of connecting diverse people, abilities and ideas contributes to social cohesion and better communication. This has a direct democratic effect: it allows citizens from different social spheres to express their interests by representing themselves in the public arena. The focus of the debate then shifts from a tone of confrontation to one centred on commonality and collaboration.

## FINDING COMMON GROUND

The main goal and strategy of [The Roots Programme](#) is to bring unlikely allies together. Founded by Ruth Ibegbuna with the purpose of reducing the polarisation that intensified in the UK after the Brexit vote, the programme creates bridges between people from very different walks of life and high-level decision-makers in order to facilitate shared understanding around their differences and similarities.

How do we get people in the UK to come together with curiosity and compassion and listen to each other with respect and genuinely hear what people are saying about their lives and about their communities?

Ruth Ibegbuna, [The Roots Programme](#)<sup>28</sup>



The organisation offers two programmes aimed at different age groups. One programme brings together state school students to engage with private school youth from wealthy backgrounds. The second one convenes working-class community

leaders and senior figures in businesses, media, and politics. Throughout 6 months, the 12 participants of each group will meet, socially interact, and debate common matters by participating in each other’s communities, households, families, and social spaces. By the end of the programme, they are encouraged to use these experiences to formulate a shared vision for the country.

## THE POWER OF MOTHERS

To tackle extremism and radicalisation, Edit Schlaffer decided to put her extensive research on the topic into practice by building connections with what might seem an unlikely group of allies for global security: MotherSchools, the main programme of [Women without Borders](#), relies on the role of mothers for preventing youth extremism. Mothers may have direct experiences and unique solutions related to extremism – but they are not usually considered by international agencies. MotherSchools offers a formal teaching programme that empowers mothers to understand and prevent signs of radicalisation among their own children, reaching over 200 families in 13 countries across Europe, Asia, and Africa.

It is mothers who can detect trouble first and sound the alarm before it’s too late. We can also learn from these mothers a lot about the process of radicalisation, which you will never learn from any security agent—they never come that close.

Edit Schlaffer, [Women without Borders](#)<sup>29</sup>



Photo: Women without Borders

The programme is typically led by women who experienced radicalisation among their own families, which helps to reduce stigma around the topic, create support networks, and strengthen global security. The organisation’s bottom-up approach positions civil society in the centre of the solution for extremism while also dialoguing with local and global decision makers.

STRATEGY 4  
**LEVERAGE THE  
POWER OF NETWORKS**

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Ashoka innovators wield networks as a tool to build and reinforce democracy. Connecting with multiple stakeholders is an important aspect of every organisation, but some social entrepreneurs build entire strategies around – and deliver their projects through – networks. The methodologies of many of the organisations we analysed are based on fostering collaboration, making certain connections possible, creating platforms to link different groups, and responding to the demands of citizens and organisations (see [MakeSense](#), [The Good Lobby](#), [Adım Adım](#)). These organisations leverage existing networks – such as neighbourhoods and communities (see [Voisin Malin](#)) – but they also create new networks to enable change by developing the necessary infrastructure for collaboration.

What we do is that we provide the tools to these refugee community groups so that they can raise their voice, advocate for their own rights and become key stakeholders in humanitarian responses.

Sonia Ben Ali,  
Urban Refugees

Ashoka entrepreneurs adopt a holistic perspective of the social problems they tackle, typically working with every stakeholder involved. They simultaneously coordinate with citizens, governments, researchers, activists, and international bodies. They bind them all together to create interdependencies and solidify solutions. Leveraging the power of

## CALL TO ACTION



### **Work together for real.**

Align and coordinate projects, departments, agencies, and decision-making processes through systematic conversations and exchange. This will strengthen connections and facilitate the development of informal networks inside and outside your organisation.



### **Make friends in the neighbourhood.**

Actively coordinate and collaborate with people working in adjacent areas and fields to what you are working on. Loose networks can trigger new ideas and directions for development.



### **Network the community.**

Facilitate meetings between staff, partners, customers and beneficiaries to nurture a sense of community that can foster collaborations independent from your organisation.

networks gives the solutions of social entrepreneurs their systemic strength, enabling social actors to collectively build their own solutions. Some organisations' strategies also depend on extensive networks to gather, process, and make information available –

for example, by creating connected communities to combat online disinformation and detect institutional misconduct (see [NetBlocks](#), [Maldita](#), [Teyit.org](#), [Funky Citizens](#)).

High levels of connectivity not only enable collaboration, but also provide protection and safety for those involved in activities that challenge anti-democratic power structures. Strong networks can help activists

prevent or respond to intimidation attempts or even violent repression. Through a network approach, social entrepreneurs also make the work of civil society organisations more visible. They contribute to the continuation and growth of national and international civic sectors by linking networks through research, fundraising, and support programmes (see [Stocznia](#), [Adım Adım](#)).

## GLOBAL NETWORK AGAINST CORRUPTION

The [Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project \(OCCRP\)](#) demonstrates how networks can form the basis of democratic action. Founded by Paul Radu and Drew Sullivan, the organisation has built the largest global network of investigative journalism by connecting 45 non-profit investigative centres in 34 countries across the world to collaborate in tracking transnational corruption crimes.



By leveraging the power of networks, the OCCRP conducted more than 290 cross-border investigations. This provides citizens and governments with the information and tools needed to understand the extent of corruption crimes and take fast action.

The organisation launches around 80 major projects each year that connects their network of journalists and editors with key partners in the media, government, and civil society. This work is made possible by using a secure technological infrastructure that detects criminal patterns. Developed by a global team of programmers, data scientists, activists, and librarians, OCCRP combines technology and archive so that data uploaded by journalists around the world become accessible to others: it is a vast collaborative search engine of corporate information.

# CONNECTING CIVIL SOCIETY

**Adım Adım** transforms civic participation in Turkey by connecting individuals with civil society organisations while also playing a central role in bringing together the country's diffused NGO sector. Founded by Itir Erhart and Renay Onur, Adım Adım enables citizens to pick a cause, get to know the NGO ecosystem, create an in-depth connection with the work of a specific organisation, and participate in running events to fundraise for their chosen organisation.

In Turkey there's a different need, which is connecting individuals who think they are helpless, with NGOs, who think individuals have no power and they [NGOs] depend on the government for funds. So Adım Adım is like an umbrella organisation that trains the NGOs to speak to individuals and organise campaigns, but also trains individuals to believe they can be agents of change.

Itir Erhart, Adım Adım



The first step of this process happens through an online platform. Citizens are then encouraged to personally meet the organisation of their choice, learn about their impact and check the transparency of their spending through an online tool created by Adım Adım — the first in the country. Large numbers of citizens and organisation representatives will then meet, engage, and collaborate during running trainings and fundraising events. Adım Adım works as a platform for individuals to show their support to causes they believe in, and to have a voice in the public arena. At the same time, the organisation enables NGOs to build the necessary funds they need to keep operating, learn from each other, and become stronger by being connected.



STRATEGY 5  
**SHIFT POWER  
RELATIONS**

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Political empowerment and access to diverse socio-economic perspectives have proven to be strengthening elements for democracies and powerful tools against radicalisation.<sup>30</sup> Ashoka entrepreneurs listen to the needs and perspectives of individuals and communities, empowering them to lead in decision-making processes and develop their own solutions to the concrete issues they experience. Social innovators focus on shifting power relations in order to build more inclusive democracies: through engagement, citizens become agents of change.

What needs to be done is to give the power to the people. They are the ones that must have the equipment in their hands to tell their own stories.

Oren Yakobovich,  
Videre<sup>31</sup>

Fellows shift power relations by supporting citizens to obtain the skills, knowledge, networks, and tools needed to create independent solutions, connect with other parts of society, and demand accountability to change power structures. The organisations we analysed do this in two main ways: by working with underprivileged communities that tend to depend on top-down interventions, and by endeavouring to engage every citizen in watchdog practices to hold institutions accountable. In both cases, Ashoka innovators combat notions of powerlessness and hopelessness.

## CALL TO ACTION



### **Learn from direct experience.**

Incorporate solutions developed by those who are directly affected by the issues your policies or activities address. Acknowledge the expertise of these groups and their creativity in developing small-scale solutions for themselves.



### **Be an ally.**

Always include those affected by your programmes in decision-making processes. Make space and encourage them to play an active role in discussions and the design of solutions, services, and projects.



### **Place communities at the centre.**

Turn disadvantaged communities into conveners of debates and policy processes by physically going to the communities themselves to discuss solutions. This will also raise attention around the social consensus of where social debates take place.

Through the work of social entrepreneurs, communities become equipped to advocate for their rights and connect with relevant stakeholders – for example, by developing and strategically distributing their own media materials to expose violations and propose solutions (see [Videre](#),

[Build Up](#)). Other organisations train citizens to spot issues and pressure government bodies on all administrative levels by learning how to fact-check news, understand public spending, and detect anti-democratic violations (see [Maldita](#), [Funky Citizens](#), [Teyit.org](#), [zIndex](#), [Netblocks](#)).

## REFUGEES TO THE CENTER

Humanitarian actions, typically led by international NGOs, the UN, and national governments, tend to overlook the situation of refugees living outside the limits of camps. [Urban Refugees](#)' mission is focused on supporting refugee communities in cities to create sustainable solutions for their specific issues.

Founded by Sonia Ben Ali, the organisation shifts power structures by providing refugees' communities and associations with the tools and connections required to navigate the intricacies and the politics of the western humanitarian system. The solutions created by refugee-led grassroots movements are sustainable, cost-efficient, and effective as they emerge directly from the lived experiences of refugees.

Part of the programme is providing tools to refugee organisations so that they can advocate and protect their own rights. But another part of our work is about engaging humanitarian communities on how they can work better with those groups. There are many clichés, such as legitimacy – people say these groups are not legitimate and don't represent anyone. But who is the most legitimate to actually talk about refugee matters?

Sonia Ben Ali, Urban Refugees



Photos: Urban Refugees

After an in-depth needs' assessment of the projects developed by the associations, Urban Refugees offers tailored training to introduce new mechanisms, improve strategies, and create connections with the relevant stakeholders. Through their work, refugee-led associations learn how to strengthen their own methodologies to effectively advocate for their rights and get a seat at the table.

## WHO WATCHES THE WATCHERS?

The widespread use of technology has complexified and intensified surveillance practices, but citizens are unaware of how their online data can be collected and processed by public authorities, private companies, and other individuals. Furthermore, regulations that protect citizens against the loss of freedom through online surveillance lag behind technological development. Based in Poland, the [Panoptykon Foundation](#) works systemically to increase social control over online surveillance practices through a manifold approach that comprises research, education, and advocacy.



I believe that living in a democratic state we have a responsibility for shaping the policies that determine the way we live online. We can shape them in the direction that benefits humans more than private companies. We can demand real transparency and accountability from everybody who wants to observe us, create our data profiles and influence what we do online.

Katarzyna Szymielewicz, Panoptykon Foundation<sup>32</sup>

Founded by Katarzyna Szymielewicz, the organisation creates a network of lawyers, researchers, and activists to monitor surveillance practices and legislative processes, diagnose threats, and advocate for better regulation. Studies, podcasts, articles, and interactive educational materials are then created and disseminated through websites, social media, and Panoptykon's educational portal, empowering citizens with accessible information and the appropriate tools to protect their own rights and act as watchdogs.

STRATEGY 6  
**TAP INTO CITIZENS'  
SKILLS AND EXPERTISE**

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The work of Ashoka innovators shows that democracy is not something to be consumed as a service, but to be continuously co-produced. Just as all voices should count in healthy democracies, all skills and abilities have value. Fellows are not only connecting, empowering, and providing citizens with democratic tools, they are also tapping into what citizens can offer and promoting the strategic use of citizens' own skills and expertise.

We created a project where anyone from all over the world can connect with social entrepreneurs and help them with their challenges. But we noticed that we went further than that: in creating this community, we created a school where we could learn social business not from teachers but peer-to-peer with other members.

Christian Vanizette,  
MakeSense<sup>33</sup>

Such skills are typically confined to professional spheres and are not utilised to promote change. Ashoka entrepreneurs reframe citizens' use of skills, training, and experience from a narrow labour market focus to a broader one of public service through civic engagement.

Through their work, Ashoka Fellows bring to bear multitudes of skills, expertise, and abilities to foster democracy. They tap into the communication skills of certain individuals to bring together their communities, they make good use of citizen's creativity to solve problems,

## CALL TO ACTION



### Put work skills to work.

Use your team's skills to solve problems not only for your organisation, but also for societal challenges. Engage different skillsets in developing solutions for better interaction with your target group, with authorities, or with marginalised communities.



### Go pro bono.

Collaborate with civic projects and organisations that directly address democratic challenges to ensure that your organisation contributes to strengthening civil society in a democratic setting.

they connect law experts with grassroots organisations, they reach out to specialists of certain academic and professional areas to participate in mentoring programmes, they match professionals and organisations to create new solutions, and they rely on a diverse range of professional specialties to make their approach stronger and more effective (see [MakeSense](#), [Teyit.org](#), [RECLAIM](#), [Beyond Istanbul](#), [Open Knowledge International](#), [Urban Refugees](#)). From industry gurus who live and breathe policy to airport workers who are experts on the use of security systems, everyone can contribute.

# LOBBYING FOR GOOD

What if civil society organisations had access to the same resources and expertise as corporations? Founded by Alberto Alemanno in Belgium, [The Good Lobby](#) aims to democratise and popularise participatory democracy by turning citizens into lobbyists who can advocate for social change. Based on years of research on democracy and civic engagement, The Good Lobby's strategy is to create a network of civic organisations looking for collaboration and citizens who are willing to use their skills for a cause. This connection aims to fill the gap of civic empowerment in Europe and enable individuals to actively participate in shaping public policy.

I believe that everyone has some talent and expertise to share with society. At The Good Lobby we strive to make that expertise accessible to everyone. That means that everyone has to find her own talent so that we can unleash it.

Alberto Alemanno, The Good Lobby



At the heart of their strategy lies the notion that every citizen and organisation can play a role in lobbying for good. Through this process, every citizen can make use of their skills and time to become involved. The Good Lobby offers training on EU legal and policy advocacy for young advocates, connects NGOs with pro bono experts, trains civic organisations to engage in lobbying to improve society, and matches these organisations with a citizen volunteer base by tapping into their diverse set of skills and expertise.

# FIGHTING DISINFORMATION

Fake news has become one of the most pressing issues in contemporary politics. The rapid spread of disinformation through digital platforms can determine election results, intensify polarisation, and drastically change political contexts. [Maldita](#), founded by Clara Jimenez in Spain, is creating a fact-checking community that recruits citizens to combat disinformation and become active parts in the process of analysing, checking, and disseminating facts.



Photo: Maldita

Their community of over one million individuals also includes fourteen thousand volunteers from different professional fields who can contribute with their specialist knowledge to check specific information. This diverse team is formed by doctors, lawyers, prison guards, scientists, security workers, and many other professionals who leverage their expertise to fight against disinformation. Maldita disseminates their action through different platforms where fake news is usually spread, including plug-in tools for mobile applications and websites, besides offering in-person trainings and workshops.



**STRATEGY 7**  
**USE RESEARCH AS**  
**A BASIS FOR REFLECTION**  
**AND ACTION**

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The importance of knowledge and rigorous research was found to be a key element for reflection and effective social action to improve democracies among the organisations we analysed. Social entrepreneurs democratise research by turning it into a citizen skill: information gathering and critical analysis are no longer the sole domain of professionals, but a key skill for active citizenship.

We need to collect data, we need to be measuring the same things to generate our own strategies. Because the institutions that are supposed to do it for us are not.

Michael Sani,  
Bite the Ballot

Innovators position research at the basis of policy processes, advocacy strategies, and community action. The work of social entrepreneurs makes knowledge production an accessible tool and an embedded element of a democratic society.

In order to achieve this, social entrepreneurs make use of different strategies. Some organisations engage citizens and communities from different backgrounds in participatory research projects to produce shared narratives, understand structural issues, and strategize informed actions (see [Beyond Istanbul](#), [Videre](#), [Foraus](#)). Other organisations focus on making data easily accessible and processable for a mainstream audience by processing large quantities of available data, reducing its volume, and

## CALL TO ACTION



### Think deeply.

Invest in documentation and in the analysis skills of your employees and the communities you work with. Cultivate critical thinking, reflection capacity, and argumentation clarity around relevant challenges.



### Promote transparency.

Document and make available the data you collect on donations, campaign contributions, support of civil society organisations, public contracts, funding sources, etc.



### Open up to others.

Collaborate with independent organisations assessing data coming from your work. This will ensure more transparency, accountability, and credibility of your activity and processes.

making it available for the general public (see [zIndex](#), [Teyit.org](#), [Panoptikon Foundation](#), [Open Knowledge Foundation](#)).

Through this empowerment frame, organisations not only present accessible information, but also engage citizens in the process, thereby turning

data into a civic engagement tool. This helps counteract the overload that emerges from large quantities of data and information that can exhaust and disengage citizens.

Another use of research shared by many organisations is to establish networks that produce and share knowledge for

policy and advocacy purposes. Using basic research skills and the right data, citizens can keep institutions accountable. Throughout this process, they also redefine key ideas — such as transparency, privacy, and safety — that take on new dimensions in democracies in the digital age.

## THE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC LIFE

**The School of Public Life**, created by Éva Tessza Udvarhelyi in Hungary, offers a potent form of civic engagement and social justice that is based on interpersonal connections, participatory research, and advocacy. The School invites those who are at the margins of society and directly experience social problems — such as housing issues — to connect and organise with social movements.

Democracy cannot be understood without inequality and economic inequality and political inequality. I don't believe that democracy can exist without a fairer distribution of resources.

Éva-Tessza Udvarhelyi, The School of Public Life



Photos: The School of Public Life

In The School of Public Life, qualitative research becomes a powerful and democratic tool to understand and act upon social matters. Organisations and participants from diverse contexts engage in training sessions and in longer-term projects, in which they design and conduct the very research that affects them in order to understand the structural causes of the issues they face — as well as the collective solutions and accountability.

# TRANSPARENT DEMOCRACY

In Romania, economic crisis and political corruption have recently led citizens to the streets, but everyday civic engagement is still under development. Founded by Elena Calistru, [Funky Citizens](#) aims to support citizens in developing these skills by creating research-based data-driven advocacy tools.

When our young democracy was born, everybody got the feeling that the Western model of transparency would also immediately happen in Romania. Unfortunately, we can't see a difference in the way the administration works for its citizens.

Elena Calistru, Funky Citizens<sup>34</sup>



The organisation offers multiple online platforms to help citizens acquire critical skills and the necessary tools to understand and influence public sector reform, with an emphasis on transparency — a pressing issue in the country. Working closely with investigative journalists, activists, technologists, and international bodies, Funky Citizens researches and exposes data that is usually hidden. Projects include public spending, open justice, corruption, fact-checking, and civic education. Each of these initiatives has its own digital platform that invites citizens to think, react, engage, and become active participants in building Romanian democracy.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

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Democracies around the world are changing and so are society's demands. The speed of social and technological developments is taking its toll on democratic processes, calling for a new wave of democratic innovation. Despite the current retreat of democratic governments, new formats of advancing and strengthening democracy are also being developed: participatory mechanisms of policy-making, novel deliberative processes, and the strengthening of civic engagement through the use of technology are some examples of initiatives that can be observable locally, regionally, and at the EU level.<sup>35,36</sup>

The core approach of the work of Ashoka Fellows is that **democracy needs to become an everyday skill exercised by every citizen**. Entrepreneurs talk about “the end of effortless democracy” (Jakub [Kuba] Wygnański, Stocznia) and the need to stop “rendering citizens as consumers of politics instead of producers” (Michael Sani, Bite The Ballot). Democracy is, therefore, seen as a result of engaged citizens and not merely a system of formal policies and institutions.

The work of Ashoka innovators anchors the ways in which democratic innovations can have a stronger, socially institutionalised effect on political systems. The strategies of Fellows also indicate the directions and the extent to which these innovations can help shape the future of democracies in Europe and worldwide. In future democratic societies, citizens will not only take part in elections and follow the agendas of political parties, but they will directly

shape the public agenda and contribute to solutions for the issues they themselves face.

Technology proves to be an important mediator and magnifying glass for dynamics between different social groups, but the key to democratic engagement will continue to be in the personal interactions that foster empathy and mutual understanding. Further development of data processing and research techniques will play a central role in the way in which citizens keep decision-makers and public institutions accountable, thus reshaping power dynamics. Networks and collaboration will also be key in ensuring the health of democratic institutions – everyone must be on board.

The solutions and strategies provided by the work of Ashoka entrepreneurs for creating more stable democracies can only achieve full potential if they are closely integrated with each other and equally incorporated by governments, businesses, and civil society organisations. In this study, our aim was to highlight these connections, inviting every stakeholder to get inspired and take meaningful action. On each insight, we present case studies and calls to action exemplifying what we can do right now to strengthen democracy in our everyday work. Our desire is that this study can serve as a starting point for new conversations and collaborations across Ashoka, between entrepreneurs, and among stakeholders, with a mindset of increasing the impact of innovators in democracy and civic engagement.

# GET INSPIRED AND TAKE ACTION WITH THE ASHOKA FELLOWS

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**Do a Craftivist Collective activity**



**Join the team of experts  
of The Good Lobby**



**Collaborate in solving challenges of social  
enterprises through MakeSense**



**Help Maldita fact-check news**



**Get in touch with any of the Ashoka  
Fellows to see how you can contribute.**

# METHODOLOGY

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The report is based on the inductive qualitative analysis of the work and profiles of 25 Ashoka Fellows and their organisations working on democracy and civic engagement issues in 11 European countries (France, UK, Poland, Romania, Austria, Switzerland, Belgium, Hungary, Turkey, Spain, and Czech Republic).

We selected the social entrepreneurs out of the 210 Ashoka Fellows elected in Europe between 2013-2019. The criteria for including them in the sub-sample was that they a) have an explicit focus on democracy in their work and b) the organisation or the target group of the organisation have an explicit involvement in political and/or policy processes.

The qualitative data used for the analysis on each social entrepreneur consisted of the profile available in the Ashoka databases and websites, as well as secondary data (publications, reports, recordings, videos, etc.) gathered through online research that explain the work of the social entrepreneur. Additionally, we conducted eight semi-structured interviews with the social entrepreneurs from the sample who responded to our invitation: Michael Sani (UK), Nicola Forster (Switzerland), Éva-Tessza Udvarhelyi (Hungary), Sonia Ben Ali (France), Sarah Corbett (UK), Jakub (Kuba) Wygnański (Poland), Alberto Alemanno (Belgium), Itir Erhart (Turkey).

The interviews focused on gathering updated details about the work of social entrepreneurs, as well as to better contextualise the intermediary analysis results and gather additional strategies into the most recent developments in democracies across the continent.

The data collected was open coded around strategies that social entrepreneurs employ in their work, as well as the target groups they address and their visions on the development of democracy in their countries and Europe. Based on the core focus of their strategies, the social entrepreneurs were then clustered in four main areas of action: political education, community empowerment, organised civil society, and data transparency and protection. You can see the way organisations were clustered in the table below.

Based on the coding of the strategies and methods used by each organisation, we conducted a further analysis of the common patterns emerging across areas of action and organisations. The two researchers in the project listed these common patterns in several iterations and cross-checking processes, in order to give the results more reliability. A list of 10 insightful strategies employed by the organisations was then discussed within a broader Ashoka team knowledgeable of



the topic and the work of Ashoka Fellows. We also cross-referenced these strategies with additional information collected through the semi-structured interviews. Based on these consultations and feedback rounds, we formulated the refined list of seven strategies that are the core of this report.

Area of action	Description	Organisation Name	Country
Political education	Organisations focus on developing the skills of citizens related to their engagement with the political landscape and policy processes.	Bite the Ballot	UK
		Foraus	Switzerland
		The Roots Programme	UK
		RECLAIM	UK
		The School of Public Life	Hungary
Community empowerment	Organisations focus on facilitating the involvement of communities in democratic processes, support them to voice relevant issues for them and empower them to generate solutions for these issues.	Voisin Malin	France
		Urban refugees	France
		Beyond Istanbul (Center for Spatial Justice)	Turkey
		Videre	UK
		Build up	Spain
		Craftivist Collective	UK
		IBS (Institute of Social Safety)	Poland
Women without Borders	Austria		
Organised civil society	Organisations focus on connecting citizens with civil society organisations for know-how transfer and support.	Stocznia	Poland
		Adım Adım	Turkey
		MakeSense	France
		The Good Lobby	Belgium
Data transparency and protection	Organisations focus on making information and data available and reliable so that it strengthens democratic institutions and processes.	zIndex	Czech Republic
		OCCRP (Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project)	Romania
		Open Knowledge International	UK
		Panoptykon Foundation	Poland
		Teyit.org	Turkey
		Maldita	Spain
		Net Blocks	Turkey
		Funky Citizens	Romania

## **Limitations and Future Research**

This study was based on a limited sample of organisations addressing democratic challenges. The results are thus in no way exhaustive or fully representative for all civil society organisations engaging in this topic. The sources of data used crossed a longer timespan which might make some of the information used in the analysis outdated. We were also not able to interview, and thus triangulate, our emerging strategies with all social entrepreneurs included in the study. The analysis at this stage only identifies underlying trends in the work of social entrepreneurs and it does not go into detail on what the next steps for increasing collective impact among them are. This research question is left for future studies, as is a closer look at the diverse institutional settings in which these social entrepreneurs operate. Future research can also address more closely the connection between the work of Ashoka Fellows and other organisations directly undermining democratic settings.

# ORGANISATIONS INCLUDED IN THE REPORT

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**Bite the Ballot**, founded by **Michael Sani** in the UK, creates a network of young leaders which mobilises youth to vote, campaigns for facilitating registration requirements, and uses online media to bring relevant political issues to their attention, triggering their political participation.



**Foraus**, led by **Nicola Forster** in Switzerland, engages youth in the political processes around issues of their interest. They conduct research, write position papers on these matters, and mobilise around election campaigns that address these causes.



**The Roots Programme**, founded by **Ruth Ibegbuna** in the UK, is fostering civic participation by bringing together people from different walks of life to socialise and debate matters that affect them all.



**RECLAIM**, founded by **Ruth Ibegbuna** in the UK, is supporting working-class youth in becoming community leaders and understanding their central role in the political system. The youth-led campaigns leverage their own experiences. They address issues by partnering with governments, businesses, media, and educational institutions.

**The School of Public Life**, founded by **Éva-Tessza Udvarhelyi** in Hungary, is inviting those who are directly affected by certain social issues (such as housing) to become researchers in order to assess the collective aspects of their individual situations, understand structural causes, and advocate for solutions.





**Voisin Malin**, founded by **Anne Charpy** in France, relies on the existing networks of neighbours in vulnerable neighbourhoods and on the central role that certain individuals have in weaving through their community to create bridges with public and private services.



**Urban Refugees**, led by **Sonia Ben Ali** in France, works to support, connect, and empower refugees living in cities around the world. It collaborates with refugee leaders and communities, connecting solutions and enabling refugees to advocate and influence policies that affect their lives.



**Beyond Istanbul (Center for Spatial Justice)**, founded by **Yaşar Adanali** in Turkey, develops a participatory model of urban planning in which engineers, architects, activists, students, and city planners create collaborative projects so that spaces in the city are inclusive and socially just.



**Videre**, created by **Oren Yakobovich** in the UK, turns citizens in communities affected by human rights violations into journalists that film and expose violations and advocate for solutions, instead of depending on top-down interventions.



**Build Up**, founded by **Helena Puig Larrauri** in Spain, brings complex peacebuilding processes to the hands of the affected communities. By amplifying their voices and creating engagement with the use of co-produced digital toolkits, communities that are the object of international peacebuilding negotiations come to the centre of the solutions.



**Craftivist Collective**, led by **Sarah Corbett** in the UK, engages communities in developing creative and mindful approaches to activism, focusing on collaboration rather than confrontation.



**IBS (Institute of Social Safety)**, created by **Jacek Purski** in Poland, is making youth radicalisation processes understandable and identifiable for school staff and police officers, enabling the community to spot extremist tendencies at an early stage.

**Women without Borders**, led by **Edit Schlaffer** in Austria, fights youth radicalisation by engaging mothers in the process globally. Mothers are trained to spot early signs of radicalisation in their families and act as community advocates. The model functions based on family and community stability and support, rather than military and police intervention.



**Stocznia**, created by **Jakub (Kuba) Wygnański** in Poland, plays a central role in establishing and organising the citizen sector of Poland by connecting CSOs, citizens, and government.



**Adım Adım**, founded by **Itir Erhart** and **Renay Onur** in Turkey, builds a network to connect Turkey's CSO ecosystem by creating a fundraising programme and a transparency platform that allows citizens to collaborate with NGOs through running events.



**MakeSense**, founded by **Christian Vanizette** in France, connects social enterprises that want to solve certain problems with citizens willing to collaborate by organising a network that can interact online, offline, internationally and locally depending on the format of each project.



**The Good Lobby**, created by **Alberto Alemanno** in Belgium, proposes an effective way for citizens to make use of their skills and free time to lobby for causes they care about, with concrete examples of how policies can be changed through strategic civic engagement. The organisation matches organisations with specific demands and citizens with the necessary expertise to work together on lobbying for social causes.



**zIndex**, founded by **Jiří Skuhrovec** in the Czech Republic, is a public procurement benchmark that enables citizens to have a more transparent and therefore trustworthy overview of the way authorities undertake public tenders. The platform ranks the performance of different institutions and goes further by working with agencies to improve their processes based on the assessment results.





[Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project \(OCCRP\)](#), founded by **Paul Radu** in Romania, fights international organised crime by connecting a new generation of global investigative journalists with a diverse group of programmers, officers, data scientists, and even librarians, to develop and feed data to the technological infrastructure created by the organisation to expose crime.



[Open Knowledge International](#), founded by **Rufus Pollock** in the UK, empowers citizens and civil society organisations to effectively make use of available open data, while also working with government and policymakers towards a system in which data is open by default.



[Panoptykon Foundation](#), founded by **Katarzyna Szymielewicz** in Poland, draws attention to contemporary tools of control that potentially endanger citizen privacy rights. By combining monitoring, research, advocacy, and education, the Foundation established a platform to enable civil society to monitor surveillance mechanisms and legal interventions that affect privacy rights.



[Teyit.org](#), founded by **Mehmet Foça** in Turkey, created a powerful fact-checking tool that connects citizens with journalists and promotes digital literacy while also supporting psychologists and sociologists to produce research about disinformation in Turkey.



[Maldita](#), founded by **Clara Jimenez** in Spain, creates a fact-checking movement to fight against fake news with the help of an extensive community that connects different types of expertise, from lawyers to airport workers.



[NetBlocks](#), founded by **Alp Toker** in Turkey, activates extensive global networks to track and expose internet shut-downs and censorship led by governmental authorities, creating a data-based movement for the right of information in developing democracies.



[Funky Citizens](#), led by **Elena Calistru** in Romania, uses research-based and data-driven advocacy tools to strengthen citizen skills and engagement in public life and to ensure more accountability of government spending and actions.

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