



THE ART OF FINDING CHANGEMAKERS



ASHOKA

LESSONS FROM ASHOKA
EUROPE'S SEARCH PROCESS

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS & CREDITS	2
HOW WE FIND AND ELECT LEADING SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS.....	3
What makes Ashoka's search process so effective?.....	3
We build engaged Nominator networks.....	4
The selection criteria.....	6
The search and selection process	7
We build trust with candidates.....	8
We have a well-designed, multi-stage selection process that allows for adaptation to local contexts	11
We learn by doing, making mistakes, and collaborating	17
CONCLUSION	19

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This paper would be impossible without the hard work and generosity of Ashoka's Venture (Search and Selection) staff across Europe.

Their expert intuition, developed over hundreds of interviews and years of study to deeply understand new sectors, fields, and ideas, is central to Ashoka's success in the field of Social Entrepreneurship. Thank you for your hard, and often unrecognized work!

More specifically, a number of experienced staff were interviewed in-depth and contributed ideas, suggestions, and insights that are captured in this paper, they are the contributors mentioned below. In addition to their work with our Venture team (Search and Selection), many carry out other leadership responsibilities within Ashoka. We are deeply grateful for their contributions and work to support Fellows to make the world a better place.

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HOW WE FIND AND ELECT LEADING SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS

By Todd Pavel and Kenny Clewett

What makes Ashoka's search process so effective?

Ashoka in Europe has championed more than 600 leading social entrepreneurs for lifetime Fellowship election. These Fellows solve shared challenges by addressing root causes rather than symptoms. Their innovative work is changing how systems function for the good of many. Studies of their impact – including the most recent analysis of global Fellows' systems change strategies, *The Unlonely Planet* – bear this out. How do European teams find and elect these powerful change leaders? What goes into the process to make it so effective? Conversations with more than 10 Venture colleagues from around the continent have surfaced four key answers.¹



We spend significant time in intimate conversations with candidates and new Fellows, to both learn about their work and to share insights that might be helpful. Onboarding interviews with new and experienced Fellows, Ashoka Spain 2021.

¹ Venture is Ashoka's "Search and Selection" area, responsible for identifying innovative social entrepreneurs and leading them through Ashoka's renown selection process (see: <https://www.ashoka.org/recommend-ashoka-fellow>). This report is a summary of an internal report on trends and insights in Venture Europe based on interviews with eleven Venture colleagues across Europe, with varying degrees of Venture experience. For more on Venture Europe or to read other reports, reach out to ventureeurope@ashoka.org.

WE BUILD **ENGAGED** NOMINATOR NETWORKS

ENGAGED

Nominators become good nominators by being unsuccessful. We've created feedback loops so that when nominations aren't successful, we tell nominators why. Then, they make better nominations. This process is important to keep them engaged, and to show that we appreciate them. I also ask them to do site visits and help with interviews. They are really part of my team.

CASILDA HERASO

Venture Champion in Madrid, Spain

We rely on a curated network of nominators who are familiar with our criteria and are regularly engaged by teams to cultivate mutually beneficial relationships

These nominators include ecosystem partners from diverse stakeholder groups (researchers, media, corporate leaders, etc.), Ashoka *Fellows*, members of the *Ashoka Support Network*, former Ashoka staff and others.

We work regularly with these nominators in a dedicated review of Fellowship criteria to build a foundation for aligned nominations in the future. Often we invite nominators to mock panels that help Fellow candidates prepare for the 2nd Opinion stage.¹ Such personalized engagement, while time-intensive, translates into nominators' long-term support for Venture efforts, as well as other opportunities to increase impact in their fields of work. Constant feedback loops on nominations sharpen nominators' understanding of what Fellowship criteria looks like in action. This results in better nominations subsequently, and indirectly, builds new relationships and knowledge sharing experiences between key leaders in the social innovation ecosystem.

In addition to building effective networks of nominators, over the last few years, *Venture leads across Europe are intentionally diversifying these networks, especially seeking more representation and decision-making from people from underrepresented communities* (e.g. black people, those with African descent, those from other migrant backgrounds, people from Roma and Sinti communities, as well as people from rural communities). This effort is essential to keep

identifying brilliant proximate leaders² who are innovating within their communities and beyond. Additionally, we are developing open-source nominating tools utilizing technologies and social media.



Ashoka Fellow Carmen Gheorghe (Romania 2020) founded *E-Romnja*, which builds and cultivates communities of Roma women where they have a voice and decision-making power. A Roma Social Entrepreneur, she displays the power of proximate leaders.

¹ See section on Ashoka's criteria and process below.

² Proximate leader refers to "someone who has a meaningful relationship with groups whose identity, experience, or community are systematically stereotyped, feared, dismissed, or marginalized." In Angela Jackson, John Kania & Tulaine Montgomery, "Effective Change Requires Proximate Leaders," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Oct 2, 2020. URL: https://ssir.org/articles/entry/effective_change_requires_proximate_leaders (accessed 14 November, 2022).

THE SELECTION CRITERIA



THE NEW IDEA

A new solution, or new approach to a social problem that has the potential to change the pattern across a field at a national or regional level.



CREATIVITY

Successful social entrepreneurs must be creative both as goal-setting visionaries and in the essential follow-up of problem solving.



ENTREPRENEURIAL QUALITY

A true social entrepreneur is so committed to his or her vision that it is impossible for him or her to rest until the vision becomes a new pattern across society



SOCIAL IMPACT OF IDEA

Successful social entrepreneurship needs not only an extraordinary champion to develop an idea but a powerful, practical new idea that will spread on its own merits.



ETHICAL FIBER

An entrepreneur with a strong sense of ethics and commitment to others and the new idea will bring about a positive transformational change for the good of all.

THE SEARCH AND SELECTION PROCESS

NOMINATION

Nomination is the first step in the selection process. Once a potential Fellow has been nominated, it is important to properly address the new lead.

Read Section 1 to know more about the [Nominators Network](#)

1ST OPINION

It is during this step that most of the baseline information regarding the individual and his or her efforts is gathered.

Selection Criteria: New Idea, Creativity, Social Impact of the Idea, Entrepreneurial Quality, and Ethical Fiber.

2ND OPINION

The Second Opinion review is conducted by a trained and specially selected member of the Ashoka staff. This review consists of a interview with the Candidate that explores his or her life history, the new idea, and the strategy for implementing and spreading that idea.

PANEL

A typical Selection Panel involves three external experts, who understand local context and are versed in social entrepreneurship. After reading analyses of the candidates and Ashoka's criteria, they carry out individual interviews with each candidate. The panel then deliberates and decides, by unanimous consent, whether a candidate fulfills Ashoka criteria, in order to pass on to the final phase.

BOARD

Before a Candidate can be approved as a Fellow, the Country Staff needs to submit his/her documentation to Ashoka's [GlobalBoard of Directors](#) for final approval.

WE BUILD **TRUST**
WITH CANDIDATES

TRUST

It's crucial to tailor questions to the candidate and do prep beforehand about their organisation. I make sure I know the organisation inside and out, and my strategy is, for what I haven't found online, I then enquire about it to get behind the scenes. After this prep, I focus on the candidate's view of current challenges in their field, and how they position themselves to address them.

NICOLE PAGAN

Venture Sourcer in Geneva, Switzerland and London, UK

In our work with leading social entrepreneurs, we care about the whole person and their changemaking journey, not just their fit with specific criteria

Our process and practice are designed to build trust with candidates from the very start, whether they become Fellows or not. Venture colleagues focus the initial in-depth conversation not on explicit assessment of criteria alignment but instead on learning more about the candidates' work and impact.

But first, these colleagues conduct robust due diligence to grasp both fundamentals of candidates' models and language used on their organizations' websites. Colleagues then use this knowledge and vocabulary when first speaking with candidates to ask questions that dig deeper.

Many Fellowship programmes rely initially on written applications. This puts the burden on candidates who are already stretched to share information that may be easily found online. This can create barriers for leaders who do not have the training or resources to fill out rigid forms. Written applications are impersonal by design; candidates merely answer a pre-packaged list of queries. Our focus on personalizing each conversation creates goodwill and trust. It also acknowledges in a tangible way each candidate's individual journey. Some colleagues also pointed out that by asking questions in the first interview about the problems candidates wish to solve and why they are so committed, candidates then have the space to talk about what drives them in language that matters to them. *Venture staff thereby initially prioritise learning over evaluating, understanding over advising.* And they ask 'why?' multiple times, often giving



Ashoka's gatherings bring together Fellows, and other key stakeholders, often including candidates, to learn from each other and grow in their changemaking. Ashoka Changemaker Summit 2019, Barcelona.

the candidate room to explain motivations and show their thought process all too uncommon, as they generally only have the opportunity to share quick and simple pitches.

There is a very delicate balance that we strive to hold when interviewing candidates. On the one hand, we seek for transparency and directness with candidates in regards to the length and stages of the process and the risk of a failed candidacy. Indeed, colleagues noted that it is important not to waste a candidate's time if it becomes clear after a conversation or two that they are not a fit with Fellowship criteria. Internal benchmarking, whereby a Venture representative checks in with a Fellow or other members of the community to learn their take on a candidate's innovation and impact, is a go-to strategy for many. Yet, we meet candidates at different stages in their changemaking journey.

When they are early or still figuring out their model, our conversations often look more like coaching, to help them to further develop their strategy, or provide network connections and other opportunities.

This enables Ashoka to hold a quite wide and diverse network of social entrepreneurs in all stages of innovation, that we engage with formally and informally on a regular basis. We therefore hold privileged position, able to quickly perceive trends and blank spaces for innovation across sectors, and knowing who is who in most contexts.



We're now working on achieving a greater presence in smaller cities. One way to do this is by holding panels and by engaging new partners there. The idea of asking Venture representatives and candidates to use simple language is also a game-changer. We need to describe our work simply. Without doing that, expanding our networks will be tricky.

MARTYNA RUBINOWSKA

Venture Champion in Warsaw, Poland

Venture Champion in Warsaw, Poland The trust we build with candidates enables us to share back our understanding of their work through an Ashoka lens. It also means we can challenge candidates to think differently about how to scale impact. The peer-to-peer relationship we cultivate facilitates collegial sparring. A few colleagues said that any articulation of a candidate's work – from the New Idea Statement to Board profile – must be shared with the candidate first to ensure they see themselves in it.



Our biggest strength is that we all act as analysts. But as we start to articulate the new idea, candidates must see their work in it. And if we do some coaching of a candidate, we need to make sure we ask ourselves how much of it is valuable for them and us.

Clara Bräuer

Venture Champion in Berlin, Germany

**WE HAVE A WELL-DESIGNED,
MULTI-STAGE SELECTION PROCESS
THAT ALLOWS FOR ADAPTATION
TO LOCAL CONTEXTS**

ADAPTATION

No individual alone can identify the perfect social entrepreneur. There needs to be a group of questioners to pull that out. This is definitely a strength of our process. The 1st and 2nd Opinion conversations all shape a narrative about the candidate that is different than other narratives. We talk about the whole person. And we act like mirrors: we help social entrepreneurs see themselves in new ways.

KENNY CLEWETT

Venture Europe Lead in Madrid, Spain

This framing, and the peer-to-peer dynamics that result, help to set aside the power relationship that so many of our candidates experience when talking with potential funders or partners. It also reinforces our commitment to learning from and celebrating every changemaker's work

Nearly all colleagues who were interviewed pointed to the design of the Venture process itself as fundamental to their success. Emphasis on multi-dimensional criteria that encompasses both model (new idea, social impact) and person (creativity, entrepreneurialism, ethical fibre) requires in-depth research and due diligence that then builds a unique, holistic picture of a candidate and their changemaking. It is the emphasis placed on candidates as individuals that many colleagues find particularly important. Some talked about how our questions about a candidate's early life, changemaking journey, and vision for the future highlight our interest in them as human beings. They also enable us to continuously learn more about the role that one's organic connection to shared problems and commitment to solving them plays in changing unjust systems.

Colleagues also said that the five selection stages – Nomination, 1st Opinion, 2nd Opinion, Panel, and Board review – create multiple opportunities for new perspectives on candidates' work that helps to deepen Venture staff's own understanding of how and why candidates align with the five criteria. Formal and informal reference checks do, too. Both local and international opinions add complexity and nuance to our understanding of innovation and impact. That, in turn, strengthens how we profile candidates for Board review. This process necessarily helps Venture staff more fully

grasp the criteria itself, which informs the intuition that many Venture staff develop when assessing candidate fit.

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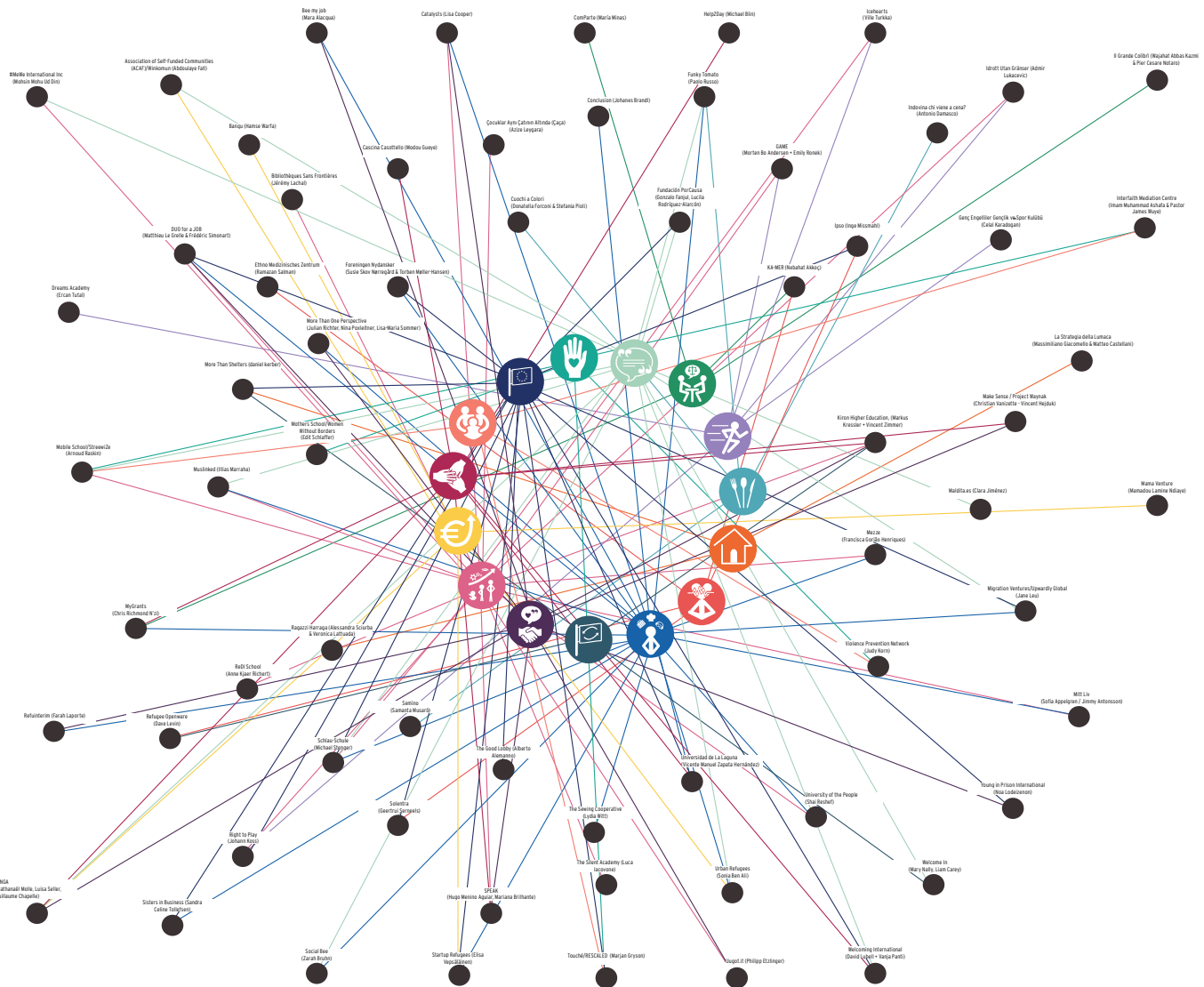
We create an environment so that the candidate feels welcomed without it seeming informal. We've done our research because it can get tricky if you don't know what you're asking about. But it's a conversation, not an interview.

Isabel Galvis

Venture Sourcer in Turku, Finland



Italy Second Opinion and Panel, 2018.



-  **EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING**
-  **FINANCIAL CAPACITY AND START UPS**
-  **FOOD CULTURE**
-  **FORMAL AND INFORMAL SUPPORT NETWORKS**
-  **HEALTH AND WELLBEING**

-  **HOUSING**
-  **INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGE**
-  **LEGAL SUPPORT**
-  **MEDIATION, NEGOTIATION AND REINTEGRATION**
-  **NARRATIVE**

-  **POLICY**
-  **PREVENTING VIOLENCE AND RADICALISATION**
-  **SPORTS**
-  **TRANSITION COUNTRIES**
-  **YOUTH EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

A snapshot of the mapping **Hello Europe** carried out with solutions from around Europe between 2016 and 2020. Some were invited through the process, and all received support through accelerators and partners. More at: [Hello Europe](#).

EXPLORE THE PORTFOLIO

Although these phases are standard and used across Ashoka, they can look different depending on geography and sector. For example, teams operating in less mature social entrepreneurship ecosystems often stretch the 1st Opinion stage over many months (or even longer) to ensure that candidates have exposure to and experience with Ashoka's understanding of social entrepreneurship and systems change before advancing to the New Idea Call. Others might spend more time with earlier-stage candidates from underrepresented communities in order to help diversify the Fellowship. This might take more time initially but enables enriching our understanding of systems change in this area. For example, **Hello World**, our global migration initiative, mapped the field of migrant-led social innovations across 14 countries across Europe, also providing support through accelerators and partners to these social entrepreneurs, many who were in earlier phases than the typical Fellow candidate. In the process we identified key subfields where innovation was emerging and potential Fellow candidates.

Over the past 40 years, this process has proven effective. It has also been improved in multiple ways, and our understanding of the criteria continually deepens as we elect more Fellows (and other constituents such as young changemakers and staff, whose selection is based on the same criteria) from more diverse backgrounds and geographies. Indeed, creating space for local and cross-cultural teams to question and expand on our criteria must continually be a part of our work, especially as we look within at elements such as unconscious biases or unintentional barriers certain words or concepts create for underprivileged groups.

There is a constant conversation within Ashoka and our nominator networks around this. Recently a number of European teams have intentionally expanded their focus towards smaller cities and rural contexts, as well as to candidates with different education and economic backgrounds, as we know from experience that major and scalable innovations often come from these places and are hidden from the mainstream networks.



We try to find candidates at seed level and get nominations on open calls with our partners. We want to help these candidates build capacity so that they get to the Fellow criteria level. We invite them to join our programmes. This includes youth offerings and the Visionary Programme. If we don't do these things to help early-stage candidates, our approach seems elitist. We need to take more risks in selecting candidates.

Michael Hagelmueller

Venture Sourcer in Vienna, Austria



Second opinion interviewers spend an average of 2-4 hours with candidates, exploring different aspects of their work in a close, conversation type setting before candidates are interviewed by panelists. Italy Second Opinion and Panel, 2018.

¹ Additionally, although there are many more technological tools and pre-established networks in the field that seemingly enable quicker and wider search, interviewed staff talk about the need for our deep, localized search, and one-on-one, personal conversations to get to the core of the candidate's work and journey. Only this will enable us to continue selecting the world changing Fellows we pride ourselves in supporting.

¹ For more on the power and need of diversity in our fellowship, see Bunmi Otegbade, Kenny Clewett and Lorena Garcia Duran, "Diversity Accelerates our 'Everyone a Changemaker' Future", Social Innovations Journal, vol. 11, 2022. URL: <https://socialinnovationsjournal.com/index.php/sij/article/view/2029>

“

I think men are raised with the confidence to speak openly about their achievements. Women often are not, and they tend to use different language, emphasising 'we', not 'I'. So before each panel, I have tea with each female candidate. I encourage them to give themselves credit for the things they've done. And for candidates who might be seen as activists because of their work in the field, I try to have additional discussions to talk more about systems change, the 5Rs, and metrics. I don't want them to fail at the 2nd Opinion and panel stage merely because of the language they use or don't use.

Merve Nur Okutan

Venture Champion in Istanbul, Turkey and Malmö, Sweden



Building trust with candidates and creating an environment where mutual learning can happen is key. Spain and Portugal Second Opinion Interview, 2021.

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The way we sometimes talk about entrepreneurial spirit and emphasize impact numbers came from a privileged white male perspective and a particular time. These don't apply to all candidates today. I think Venture staff understand this and are nuanced as we apply criteria. We are growing here: we are working towards making the application of criteria as inclusive as it needs to be.

OVIDIU HRISTU CONDURACHE

Venture Champion in Bucharest, Romania

WE **LEARN** BY DOING,
MAKING MISTAKES,
AND COLLABORATING

LEARN

We have built a sense of teamwork and team spirit as Venture Europe. We've really created a peer support group. Sourcers are meeting together. People are sharing drafts with each other. We empower colleagues, and they empower us.

ENRICA CORNAGLIA

Venture Champion in Rome, Italy

Finally, colleagues said that teamwork is essential to doing our work successfully. Some make sure that for each conversation with a candidate, two Ashokans participate. This facilitates collaborative analysis of candidate fit, which in turn strengthens each Ashokan's understanding of the criteria and our ability to better support and work with Fellows and other constituents. Others pitch candidates to a range of colleagues to gather feedback and determine next steps. A few teams also ask those who don't do Venture to lead at least one 1st Opinion interview, and often different staff participate in other parts of the process. This adds a fresh perspective on candidates and perhaps more nuanced understanding of our five criteria while also introducing non-Venture colleagues to aspects of our work.

“

I am always surprised at the accuracy of 2nd Ops and panellists. I listen to how they explain a candidate's fit with our criteria, especially when they summarise the new idea in just one sentence. As Venture staff, we don't do that. It reinforces our own understanding.

EMILIE PELLETIER

Venture Champion in Paris, France

In Europe, we have structured Venture in a way that allows constant training and mentoring for staff involved. The structure includes localized staff, “sourcers” (staff and volunteers), who find potential candidates through desk research and nominator networks with the support of the national

team and other specialized staff. They also receive cyclical training and meet regularly with each other to discuss candidates and new ideas. As a second step, European “championers” (experienced Venture staff) support them to take the candidates through the remainder of the process, concentrating more on the final phases and writing the materials that accompany the candidates and shape our public “profiles” when they are selected¹. Some champion candidates from multiple countries, which also enables pan-continental knowledge sharing. Staff across Europe meet regularly to discuss candidates, and also engage globally with other Venture staff to train and learn from each other, enabling a permanent learning community within Ashoka. We believe this is fundamental to our recent jump in numbers and diversity of candidates.



Ashoka Fellows sometimes emerge in the most unlikely of places. Through his organization, Beeodiveristy, Bach Kim Nguyen (Ashoka Fellow Belgium) helps key environmental and business stakeholders understand and treat bees as important messengers about the world we live in and not only a resource for honey.

¹ Ashoka publishes public profiles of all Fellows, see: <http://www.ashoka.org/our-network> for more



Germany's Fellows presentation, 2023.

CONCLUSION

Ashoka's process has proven to be effective at selecting systemic social entrepreneurs that are changing the world's systems for the good of all.

This takes a lot of work. It requires putting together networks of networks of nominators and experts to better understand fields of work and what innovation looks like. It also means building trust with all candidates and helping them on their journey regardless of their status, and regularly questioning and improving our decades-old proven process to ensure it continues to be effective. And it demands a permanent learning team environment so the insights we discover live on beyond our role. It's long, hard, challenging and costly work. When we look at our Fellowship network, and spend time with these powerful Fellows, we are reminded that it is worth it.

“ONE OF THE
MOST GRATIFYING
MOMENTS FOR OUR
TEAM IS WHEN **WE**
PUBLICLY PRESENT
AND CELEBRATE
THE WORK OF NEW
FELLOWS”

APRIL 2023

VENTUREEUROPE



ASHOKA
EVERYONE A CHANGEMAKER™