

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Viewpoint
Let's Redraw the Map
By Michael Zakaras

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Fall 2016

Copyright © 2016 by Leland Stanford Jr. University
All Rights Reserved

VIEWPOINT

Let's Redraw the Map

Through a new initiative, Ashoka hopes to make the field of US social entrepreneurship more diverse, geographically and otherwise.

BY MICHAEL ZAKARAS

Not many social entrepreneurs can say that their “aha” moment came during a truck show. But that was the case for Kendis Paris. It was at a big-rig truck event in Tulsa, Okla., that Paris began to see the full potential of her idea for an initiative to fight human trafficking: She would recruit truck drivers and leaders in the trucking industry—people who work in a sector where trafficking thrives—to become active participants in that fight. Today her organization, Truckers Against Trafficking, is working with every major US trucking association and with law enforcement agencies in 23 states to curb trafficking and to maintain a cross-state rapid alert system that helps officials spot potential victims. In 2013, Paris received an Ashoka Fellowship.

Paris, who is based in Englewood, Colo., is a rarity in the field of US social entrepreneurship. To a remarkable degree, the centers of gravity in that field are now located in just a handful of coastal cities.

Between 1995 and 2015, 560 people in the United States received fellowships from one of four leading social entrepreneurship networks: Ashoka, Draper Richards Kaplan, Echoing Green, and the Skoll Foundation. These fellowships typically provide both monetary assistance and access to a powerful support network. One prominent social entrepreneur, for example, is Wendy Kopp, who received an Echoing Green Fellowship soon after she graduated from college. The resources and connections that Kopp gained through that award enabled her organization, Teach for America, to attain significant national (and ultimately global) impact.

But a close look at the distribution of US-based social entrepreneurs reveals a worrisome pattern. My colleagues and I at Ashoka, where I serve as a member of the selection team for US fellows, recently undertook a study in which we tracked down the locations of 536 of those 560 fellowship recipients. More than 60 percent of them, we found, operate in or near one of four cities: Boston, New York, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C.

This lack of diversity extends to other demographic categories. Consider the case of Ashoka. Not only do more than 60 percent of US-based Ashoka Fellows come from the same four cities, but they are also disproportionately white, male, and highly educated. Fewer than 5 percent of them identify as Hispanic, compared with 17 percent of the US population, and only 7 percent of them

identify as African-American, compared with 13 percent of the US population. Men account for 65 percent of Ashoka Fellows. Significantly, 97 percent of fellows have at least a bachelor's degree, whereas only 34 percent of Americans have that level of education. What's more, 37 percent of them have degrees from Ivy League institutions. Although we don't have precise data for other fellowship networks, we have reason to believe that they generally follow a similar demographic pattern.

That pattern suggests—erroneously—that successful social entrepreneurship is a by-product of geography or race or gender or education. In fact, social entrepreneurs come in all forms. They fit no single profile, and they follow no single path. So the real meaning of the pattern is this: People in the social entrepreneurship movement have internalized a set of biases that keep them from building a field that is as diverse as it could be.

The promise of social entrepreneurship is that it can create equitable and resilient communities everywhere. For the field to achieve that promise in the United States, it needs to become less insular. At Ashoka, we recently began a concerted effort to build a more inclusive network of US-based

social entrepreneurs. Our goal is to recruit fellows who hail from all parts of the American landscape—fellows who look like all of America.

EXPLORING OUR BIASES

The global network of Ashoka Fellows, which is more than 3,000 strong, has long exhibited a high degree of diversity. A quick scan of those fellows reveals that although many of them have PhDs and MBAs, many others have no formal degree. Some of them discovered Ashoka on the Web; others



MICHAEL ZAKARAS is director of partnerships for Ashoka United States and a member of the Ashoka Fellows selection team. He is also cofounder of the All America initiative.

Zakaras wishes to thank Simon Stumpf, director of venture and fellowship at Ashoka United States and cofounder of the All America initiative, for his help in preparing this article.

work offline or far off the beaten track. (In one instance, we were able to reach a fellowship candidate only by taking a two-hour motorized canoe ride up the Amazon.) Yet the ranks of US-based Ashoka Fellows—like those of other US-based social entrepreneurship networks—are notably homogeneous.

One reason for this homogeneity is that the process used to select fellows tends to favor a particular profile. At Ashoka, for example, most successful fellowship nominations come through referrals from people who already belong to our network. For people throughout the field, betting on what's familiar is the easiest, least risky option.

Other causes of homogeneity are more elusive. One likely factor is the fervent push to professionalize the social entrepreneurship field. That push has led some organizations to prefer highly business-oriented approaches. These organizations expect entrepreneurs to fine-tune their solutions not in conversations with ordinary people—including, yes, truck drivers—but in university design labs or enterprise accelerators.

The language used in this field is another important factor. People in social justice groups, for instance, have long been skeptical of the term “entrepreneur” because of its association with leaders of traditional for-profit businesses. In places where the link between faith communities and civic action is strong, meanwhile, the term “social entrepreneurship” can seem jarringly self-promotional.

The lack of diversity in this field also reflects broader social inequities. People of color, for example, enjoy fewer opportunities to raise money for their ventures than white people do. Echoing Green, in a report that examined patterns among its applicants, noted that 56 percent of US-based white applicants in 2016 had previously raised funds for their venture, compared with 36 percent of US-based black applicants. And among applicants who had secured financial support, whites on average had raised nearly twice as much money as their black counterparts.

Diversity among social entrepreneurs matters for an obvious reason: Entrepreneurs

from different races or different regions can raise awareness of social problems that are otherwise invisible, and they can help others to see those problems in a different light. And new perspectives, especially when they come from people who have experienced the problems that they are trying to solve, make the social entrepreneurship movement collectively smarter.

But there's a less obvious reason why it's important to broaden the reach of social entrepreneurship networks. Social entrepreneurs don't just solve problems *for* people; they involve people in solutions. Think of Paris: The success of her work depends on the willingness of truckers to own a piece of her mission. Her problem becomes their problem. People like Paris, in other words, can help build a world in which everyone takes part in solving social problems. But they cannot do so if the only social entrepreneurs who receive attention and support are those who operate in places like Boston and New York.

WIDENING OUR REACH

In January 2016, Ashoka launched All America, a strategic initiative to redraw the map of social entrepreneurship in the United States. We made a commitment to be more intentional both in our outreach to potential fellowship nominees and in our review of their nominations. We began to challenge some of the biases—many of them subconscious—that we have brought to the task of evaluating candidates. Too often, for example, we have rewarded nominees who have already won awards or who can discuss their work in language that is familiar to us. To counteract that tendency, we started placing less emphasis on written material submitted by a nominee and more emphasis on unsolicited references from people who truly understand his or her work. We noted that the number of volunteers and small donors that an entrepreneur has attracted is often a better sign of merit than a flashy website or a blue-chip funder.

Our most important step involves developing new sources of fellowship

nominations. We looked closely at the people who nominate our fellowship candidates, and we found that these nominators tend to recommend people like themselves. Indeed, 74 percent of nominators in our network suggest candidates from their own race, and 72 percent of them suggest people from the same urban area where they live. If we want to diversify our pool of fellowship candidates, we need to start by diversifying our pool of nominators.

So we have opened new conversations that will enable us to encounter new types of people. We enlisted a group that includes current Ashoka Fellows, along with other trend spotters, and this group has introduced us to a wide array of new candidates. These candidates range in age from their 20s to their 70s, and many of them work in fields that we have tended to overlook—immigrant detention, for instance—or in faith communities, where our network has been especially thin.

We have also made a commitment to *being there*. Members of our team have visited Dallas and Salt Lake City, St. Louis and Nashville, and places in between. In April 2016, we hosted an Ashoka Fellow selection panel in Atlanta. One social entrepreneur whom we met there—Casey Woods, founder of Arms With Ethics—embodies the value of this kind of outreach. Woods, born and raised in the South, is working to reduce gun violence by enlisting law enforcement officials, gun retailers, and gun owners to reduce illegal gun trafficking. It's unlikely that her approach would have originated in a big coastal city. (Woods is now an Ashoka Fellow.)

In sum, we are working to make sure that social entrepreneurship remains a powerful force for change and not just another mark of privilege. We are already making progress: Of the 15 US Ashoka Fellows whom we have chosen over the past year, 9 come from outside the four cities that have typically dominated the field. But we know we can't do this work alone. Changing this field will require a collaborative effort in which all participants show that they can move beyond their comfort zone. ■