

How to Catalyze Changemaking through the COVID-19 Crisis

Ashoka listens, enables and reinvents themselves and their community.

Ashoka believes that an innovative idea in the hand of a social entrepreneur is the most powerful force in today's world. The international organization and its global network with more than 3,600 social entrepreneurs envisions a world of social changemakers, where every person is encouraged to practice critical skills of empathy, teamwork, leadership and changemaking. 360 recently spoke with Ashoka Europe Fellowship Program's co-leader Giulia Sergi, based in Italy, to discuss her view on the COVID-19 crisis and the new path her organization is taking to mobilize the international Ashoka community. The result: distances disappear and social equality is fostered.

360: Giulia can you tell us a little bit more about Ashoka and what you do?

Giulia Sergi: Ashoka builds and cultivates a community of change leaders who recognize that the world now requires everyone to be a changemaker. Together, we collaborate to transform institutions and cultures worldwide so they support changemaking for the good of society. We believe in big ideas as a powerful source for social change and envision a world in which everyone is empowered to take action in a positive way in order to grow their ideas and have a positive impact.

I co-lead European initiatives and our European fellowship program, in which we work with partners, like Steelcase to facilitate workshops, meetings and co-learning experiences for the European community of change leaders.

360: The coronavirus spread has impacted Italy heavily. How did you respond at the beginning of the crisis?

GS: Working in the social sector, I first worried when Italy started with the lockdown especially thinking of the socio-economic impact. But within a couple of days my perspective changed as the implications on healthcare became abundantly clear. Living and working in our changemaker world requires the constant ability to adapt and see opportunities. Openness and transparency are very core values that are very important to us. Ashoka Italy is Europe-wide interconnected and shared learning and observations during the first weeks; quickly we built a smart working community and have encouraged other countries to do the same. The earlier the better.

360: Everyone is working from home and is home all the time, with few exceptions. What is your new working routine?

GS: Since the Italian government ordered a nationwide lockdown, we increased the virtual meetings with the team and with our community. In the Italian team we meet everyday at 9:00 am and avoid going into work mode immediately. Instead we use the first 15 minutes to share our personal experiences. Everyone has different challenges: one is at home completely alone or another colleague is at home with three teenager kids. Sharing best practices and challenges is one way of feeling together, the other is listening to individual challenges and the biggest lessons we go through. It's not only about finding a new way of working together digitally, at the same time it's about listening, understanding the new normal: thus to strengthen us as a team while working remotely. We believe it's the time to listen, so the same goes for our community. As a Fellowship manager, I have virtual check-ins with social entrepreneurs and Ashoka fellows. Instead of coming up with a new idea, we listen and try to understand what this moment is teaching the community. So when this is hopefully all over, we have a common experience we share and a common ground to start from.

**“Sharing that this is hard makes us more human, it’s okay to say:
I’m struggling these days.”**

GIULIA SERGI | Co-leader of the Ashoka Europe Fellowship Program

360: Listening to each other to grow as a team, that’s a simple and strong message. What other advice can give us?

GS: Most of us heard that we need to set up a new routine, but we are not aware of the boundaries we need between work and personal life, in order to do so. We see that boundaries on a mental and physical level are key. These are obvious when we go to work. So how do we integrate work and our private lives now while everything takes place in the same environment? We suggest getting dressed and keeping your morning routine, just as if you were going to work. It might sound silly, but it's an important signal for the brain and our mental health. Sticking to your habits structures your day. Another recommendation relates to the space where you work: separate work and personal life on a physical level. Try not to work from the kitchen table, your bed or sofa. Instead, take over a corner from a room where you can have a desk. By separating work from where you do everything else helps the brain. These are small steps with a huge impact; both examples structure the remote experience and help to set a routine.

360: Can you tell us about the new approach you’ve had to take conducting workshops and other engagements with your partners?

GS: The core of the Ashoka Fellowship Program is to connect social entrepreneurs from all of Europe. We offer co-learning opportunities in the form of workshops to a community of European change leaders. Additionally, we engage different change leaders through gatherings in collective impact work. This year we will focus on topics such as democracy, funding or replication system change initiatives. We used to meet in person, but due to the new situation we had to change this. We were completely transparent with our partners and our stakeholders: simply postponing the workshops was not an option. Just the opposite, it quickly became clear that our community needs the sense of team spirit, coherence and cooperation more than ever. The sense of community and health safety guided us to accelerate the digitalization of our entire organization. Obviously, we transformed physical workshops into online experiences. We don't only emphasize the content but also focus on wellbeing. We don't have a one-size-fits-all approach: every workshop or session needs a dedicated solution and an holistic approach. Digital wellbeing raises a big question: what does it mean to be fully digital as a community? Of course, we will get the help of different experts to address this aspect too.

360: What is your view on the future of these new ways of working?

GS: Of course we cannot foresee the future, but we have tools that can help us design some scenarios. We work in the field of social innovation. This means that we try to shift mindsets in order to catalyze changemaking and enable society. The COVID-19 crisis is one of the biggest social issues and we are facing it on top of the ones that still remain – for example environmental matters or democracy concerns. What is social innovation in this context, which skills do we need? When you see it from this perspective it's more than a workshop transformed into a virtual meeting, it's an experience offering solutions to many problems we already had before. For instance, are the travels we make really necessary? From an environmental perspective, clearly not. The current situation raises the question of what will be the "new normal" and pressures us to ask questions we wouldn't have asked before. For example, a good note is that inclusion will be fostered: going online, is actually more inclusive in many cases. Of course, we will go back and meet and work physically in the same space, but the digital infrastructure that we are building will be of value in the future, too. I am convinced that the new digital infrastructure will remain in place and will change forever our way of working together.

Giulia Sergi is co-leading the [Ashoka Europe Fellowship Program](#), an initiative supported by Steelcase. Her work is dedicated to supporting the innovative social entrepreneurs (Ashoka Fellows) to scale their impact and achieve systemic change in their field. She is also leading a team of Ashoka Fellows and other stakeholder creating collective impact initiatives to counter corruption and organized crime globally.

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