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Susi Hillebrand, co-founder of the [Hil-Foundation](#) and a dedicated member of the Ashoka Support Network, shares her journey from activism to philanthropy. With over 15 years of experience driving initiatives in education, diversity, and mental health, she focuses on building trust based- collaborations and empowering young people through innovative programs such as [the Girls' and Boys' Boards](#). In this interview led by Global Communication Manager Yuliya Koroleva, Susi reflects on her path, her activism for diversity and inclusion, and the lessons she has learned about systems change.

What inspired you to start the Hil-Foundation, and how has your vision evolved – especially in relation to Ashoka's mission of supporting changemakers?

Long story short: following a partial exit from our family company, I had the opportunity to create a foundation, even though I had never done anything like that before. At the time, I was working as an activist, supporting equality and inclusion – including strong advocacy for LGBTIQ+ rights – alongside broader work on social issues. A family friend, then the CEO of UBS in Austria, invited me to Paris in 2011 for an Ashoka anniversary event. It was right after Ashoka Austria had been launched, and that's where I met [Marie Ringle](#) the local Director at that time, who was one of the inspiring figures at the very beginning of my philanthropic journey. From the start, I was, in a way, “infiltrated” with Ashoka's perspective on system change and changemakers. In Paris, I also met with Ashoka Fellows [Andreas Heinecke](#) and [Bart Beetjens](#), with whom I remain connected. Our paths crossed again later through the [The Wellbeing Project](#) founded by Ashoka Fellow Aaron Pereira.

You could have chosen anything in philanthropy. Why these topics and what exactly are you trying to change?

It's not only my focus—we are three sisters, and this is our shared commitment. I drove it for a long time, but we all have personal experiences related with the focus areas such as LGBTI* and mental health and well-being, which made it a natural priority. I also define myself as diversity and inclusion activist, so I brought that perspective in. Education is another area close to our hearts—our school system hasn't changed much since it was founded, and there is a clear need for system change. In my experience, if you have a lot of financial resources, it's possible to address symptoms directly; with fewer resources, it's more effective to focus early—upstream—on the root causes. That's why we work in a trust-based way, with flexible partnerships, and low-bureaucracy. We prioritize early-stage programs- supporting the beginnings of ideas and the power of “smallness”. That's why we work in a trust-based way, with flexible partnerships and low bureaucracy.

A favourite example of system change

What's your favourite Hil-Foundation example of systems change—something close to your heart?

One of our own programs is the Girls' Board and Boys' Board. It's very low-threshold—organizations can apply easily. Then, instead of adults or directors making the decisions, the girls and boys themselves decide which projects get funded. This gives them the chance to shape and influence their own ecosystem. In the area of mental health in the changemaker space, we work to integrate the topic from the ground up, making it practical and embedded across the board.

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Collaborations with Ashoka and Fellows

Could you share a story of collaboration with Ashoka or a Fellow that moved you or challenged how you think about systems change?

In 2015, during the large refugee movement from Syria, Ashoka launched a pilot in Austria called *Ideegration n*. This initiative later evolved into [Hello Europe](#) and then [Hello World](#), which Ashoka scaled globally. We began in Austria by connecting the small grassroots organizations that emerged during that time. From that experience, we also brought similar approaches into the Austrian education system and co-founded a community foundation, [Bildung Tomorrow](#). The pilot was important—it helped both us and Ashoka grow together. Over the past ten years, we've engaged in many pilot projects. While I am no longer directly involved, that early collaboration was a strong starting point and continues to inspire how I think about systems change.

What role do these types of collaborations play in your mission—especially with Ashoka Fellows and the ASN?

A great deal. I mostly work with collective ideas and collective action, because we can't change the world alone. Ashoka Austria has nearly a 15-year history, and the Hil-Foundation has a similar track record. Our paths have crossed many times, and these collaborations have been central to advancing our shared mission.

There are so many projects and social entrepreneurs. How do you identify and support them?

I do a lot of mentoring, and we support accelerators and incubators. Specifically, I try to encourage accelerators and incubators to integrate well-being and mental health from the very beginning. Our main focus is on the ecosystem—the impact ecosystem—rather than on individual “heroes.” For us, it's about moving forward together, not alone.

You actively support youth and Young Changemakers—what have young people taught you, and what do you try to pass to them?

Today's youth need something very different than we needed 35–40 years ago. I don't want to decide what they need; they should decide for themselves. I can offer support—encouraging involvement in democracy and helping with questions like: how can I fail without shame? How can I empower myself and become stronger in a vulnerable world? What I learned from them: they can decide for themselves and take responsibility.

What urgent challenges do you see for philanthropists and changemakers today?

Democracy is very vulnerable. It's important to get involved, to focus on stability and long-term thinking—yet still be stable.

Long-term success & advice

How do you see the long-term success of the Hil-Foundation—say in 10 years?

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It's hard to focus that far ahead—the world is changing so fast. For me it's about being open-minded, taking it step by step, staying on the balance board, and focusing on what is needed right now.

What biggest advice would you give to emerging social entrepreneurs?

Be bold. Go out and talk about the world—including the most vulnerable aspects in yourself. Don't be ashamed of anything.

Power-sharing, privilege, and wealth

You've mentioned co-creation and partnerships. Why did you choose to give away power rather than hold it—and what are the outcomes?

To make it completely transparent, we didn't give away all resources— the board still decides on some. But why should I know the world better than others? It's about strengthening the ecosystem to remain resilient. It's important to involve people who are really in the driver's seat— not just the ones holding the money.

We need more philanthropists. How do you encourage people with privilege to give back?

I'm a member of the ASN network and often share what I'm doing and raise the question: *"How much is enough?"* When I'm with people who are more privileged, I try to bring that into the conversation. But there are many layers of fear—whether you're a founder with first-generation wealth or someone with inherited wealth; whether you feel permitted to act freely; whether you can identify with the level of resources you have. If you can't identify with it, it's difficult to get involved. There is a lot of research that explores what holds people back from taking action.

What does wealth mean to you—and has your view evolved?

Across networks, workshops, and Ashoka, there are many questions when you're more privileged: how to get involved, how to take responsibility. It's always a new step—taking more responsibility and becoming more aware of how much you can give and how much you need.

Should philanthropy challenge how wealth is accumulated? How does Hil-Foundation reflect that?

There is an important conversation in philanthropy about where wealth comes from and how it is used. Philanthropy should stay aware of these questions and make sure that resources are redistributed in ways that strengthen equity, agency, and long-term systemic change. At the Hil-Foundation, we reflect this by working in a low-bureaucracy, trust-based and community-led way: shifting power to those with lived experience, supporting early-stage solutions, and ensuring that funding serves broader societal benefit rather than reinforcing existing power structures.



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Mental health & founders

Mental health is a highlight topic for Hil-Foundation. How should changemakers be supported?

It's a big issue. There is still a lot of shame and stigma if someone doesn't "function" the way society expects. It's easy to forget that you—and your team and organization—must be stable, resilient to move things forward. Mental health shouldn't be treated as an add-on; it needs to build into the core of your program and your organization. If you give a grant, you can't just say "care for well-being" without providing the resources and flexibility, to make it possible—allowing time, space and support so people can stay stable and continue their works sustainably.

The three sisters & what's next

You founded Hil-Foundation with your sisters. How do you split roles and responsibilities? One joint mission?

We started together 15 years ago, defined our main topics, and then I drove it for about 13–14 years. Now we're all stepping in again. Maybe I can tell you more in two or three years how our work evolves and comes together. We have slightly different approaches, which is good—we mobilize more capital to focus on different issues.

How is your approach different from your sisters'?

I'm a systems-changer and go very early and upstream. But philanthropic work covers a wide range, and all is all needed: some are suffering right now and need immediate support, while others work on the system, so they won't suffer tomorrow. Both are needed.

And what do you value most in Ashoka and ASN?

I value Ashoka and the Ashoka Support Network for their deep experience in supporting social entrepreneurs and for the strength of their global community Ashoka strongly supports Fellows (and their teams) to gain skills, get mentors, and what they need. This tailored, people-centered approach and the powerful network behind it are what I value most.