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For more than fifteen years, Bernard Meeus has brought his entrepreneurial clarity, human warmth, and deep sense of responsibility to the Ashoka community. As Managing Partner and then as Chairman of the Board at Alcogroup SA, with an MBA from the University of Chicago and a background in engineering, Bernard has built a career at the crossroads of business leadership and social commitment. Since joining the Ashoka Support Network in 2008, he has accompanied Fellows, contributed to Globalizer journeys, and championed the belief that real change begins when people are empowered to shape their own future. In this interview, led by Global Communications Manager Yuliya Koroleva, Bernard reflects on the origins of his engagement, the stories that marked him, and the values that continue to guide his path.

Bernard, how did your journey with Ashoka begin? Was there a particular story behind it?

It started in 2008. A Belgian friend of mine, who was living in the USA at the time, contacted me because Arnaud Mourot, director of Ashoka France at that time, was coming to present Ashoka in Belgium. I went to the presentation, and after listening to it, I was very enthusiastic. I had always been interested in social issues and in education, even before I knew the term “social entrepreneurship.” I didn’t know that such a thing existed, but the idea behind it; helping people learn how to fish instead of giving them fish; — was very appealing to me. I contacted Ashoka afterwards, and I joined in 2008. I think I was one of the first members in Belgium. It was a very small organization at the time, and because of that, I had very close contact with the social entrepreneurs. They were extremely inspiring; — both personally and through their projects; — and that’s why I’m still here today.

What was so appealing to you about social entrepreneurship? What made it special?

I was already supporting financially some organizations, but many of them were not entrepreneurial. I was interested in social issues, but I was also an entrepreneur myself. So, when I discovered Ashoka’s approach; — combining social purpose with entrepreneurial thinking; — it made sense to me. It was exactly the kind of model I believed in without knowing it had a name. For me, an entrepreneur was someone who started something from nothing. I had done that twice in my life, but never with a social objective. So, discovering that people were doing this with a social objective was something new and very inspiring.



Could you please share an example of a Fellow who shaped your understanding of what a social entrepreneur is?

One of the first examples I remember was a project in a disadvantaged neighbourhood. They were trying to reintegrate people through music by creating an orchestra with children who came from families with very limited means, often living in difficult neighbourhoods. The school was called REMUA. I attended a concert later, and I saw these children — each of whom had received an instrument they didn't know how to play; — performing together after learning for some time. It was beautiful to see how they learned to collaborate, to work together, to build something collectively. Especially in a context where there was a lot of social tension. That project really illustrated what social entrepreneurship can do: create dignity, collaboration, and confidence where it is most needed. Another example that stayed with me comes from the Globalizer program. I met a Fellow from South Africa; Pat Pillay— I think he grew up in a slum in Cape Town. At some point, he said he was fed up with the post-slavery, post-colonial attitude that solutions must come from outside. He believed solutions should come from the people themselves. He created Life College, a social enterprise that offers champion mentality, character and leadership education to youth, communities, business and government. Young people aged 6 to 18 attended that school to reinforce their identity, using leadership examples like Mandela. The school grew enormously, and many students went through it with excellent results. They became more confident, more responsible, more capable of taking their destiny into their own hands. These examples showed me what social entrepreneurship really is: empowering people to change their own lives.

Why did these examples resonate with you personally?

Because I truly believe that solutions must come from the people themselves. Organizations like the Red Cross do important work, but they don't solve the root causes. When you create schools or programs that build identity, confidence, and skills, people can find jobs more easily. And when you have a job, you integrate into society, you gain trust in yourself, and you are better equipped to face life, which is not always easy. And this is not only true in South Africa. Even in Belgium, many people lack motivation, trust, or confidence. They ask themselves, "Why should I work? Why should I do anything?" And they end up doing nothing positive with their lives. So, reinforcing identity and building trust; — focusing on soft skills; — is extremely important. That's why these examples stayed with me.



You mentioned the Globalizer Program from Ashoka. Has it changed you personally or professionally?

Yes, I think it did. At the time, I was Managing Partner of Alcogroup, an ethanol company, that my brother Philippe had cofounded in 1989 with me and other investors.. Our company contributes to reducing CO₂ emissions, even if some ecologists don't like it because it comes from corn. But it's still better than nothing. I participated in a Globalizer with a social entrepreneur from Brazil called [Eduardo Mallman](#) who is working on a new concept "social bioethanol". That was interesting. When I joined Ashoka, I was 54. Our business was very successful, and at that age, you start looking for something else; — something meaningful. Ashoka didn't take a huge amount of time, but it was very inspiring. I also learned things from Ashoka that I could use in normal business. Ashoka is very well organized; — sometimes even more than companies. Very structured. I learned ways of working that I applied in my own company. I was co-CEO and responsible for HR, and I tried to keep an entrepreneurial, family spirit in the group. As the company grew, it became more difficult, but the inspiration from Ashoka stayed with me. Ashoka also gave me insight into many social problems, which broadened my perspective.

What can traditional business learn from social entrepreneurship?

First, I learned a lot from Ashoka's structure and processes. Second, social entrepreneurship reinforced my belief in entrepreneurship in general. I believe much more in private initiative than in state initiatives. The state does not fulfil its role correctly in many areas. When you meet social entrepreneurs, you see that people can achieve incredible things when they really want to. That reinforces your belief in human initiative and creativity.

Why do you believe so strongly in social entrepreneurship? What gives you hope?

Because I have seen things move. I have seen projects that make miracles. For example, the Fellow in India is David Green, an Ashoka Fellow elected in 2002. Working with the Aravind Eye Care System, he helped design and scale a model that reduced the cost of cataract surgery from over \$100 to as little as \$1–10, notably through the creation of Aurolab, which produces high-quality intraocular lenses at extremely low cost. That changed millions of lives. Some social entrepreneurs have enormous impact. [Muhammad Yunus](#), is another example for example; — millions of people were impacted by his work. He didn't just help millions of people; — he changed how the world thinks about poverty, credit, and trust. These solutions come from the bottom up. They change perceptions. They show that change is possible. Of course, when you look at



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what comes from the top; — politics, institutions; — it is sometimes terrible. But bottom-up initiatives give hope.

What makes Ashoka's approach different from other organizations?

Ashoka empowers people from the community to solve problems themselves. They become actors of change. Other organizations, like SOS Children's Villages, also do good work. They create homes, they provide love and soft skills to children, and those children later become examples in their communities. That is already a form of change. I like to support organizations when I know the people and how they work. Ashoka's difference is that the change comes from the community itself. The social entrepreneurs I met were truly actors of change. I also saw this in Mozambique, where a Dutch woman, Dorien Beurskens, created a school, Young Africa, where young people stayed for a year, worked as interns with businesses located in the same building, and 90% of them found a job afterwards. That is real change.

What values guide your engagement with Ashoka?

Empathy is very important. Ethics are important. Empowerment is important. People need initiative; — the ability to take their fate into their own hands. Empowerment means giving people the means to develop their own actions, not waiting for things to happen. Empathy is essential for everyone, not only social entrepreneurs. But Ashoka once did a study (["The Roots of Social Change: Young Changemaking in Global Context."](#)) and found that empathy was a common trait among social entrepreneurs from a very young age. That makes sense to me. Over the last five years, I have done much less. I still attend ASN meetings when I am there, and I see Perrine and discuss things with her.

Is there anything you would improve in Ashoka or the ASN community?

In the early Globalizers, we were three advisors — a junior consultant from McKinsey, one other adviser, and myself. The exchange was very strong. We had weekly calls for ten weeks, and because we were few, the connection with the Fellow was deep. Later, groups became larger — sometimes eight people. The exchange was weaker. Some Fellows I had almost no connection with. I understand why it became more structured, with templates and processes, but I felt it became too formal. My recommendation would be to limit groups to four advisors. But my experience is from seven years ago, — so things may have changed.



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How would you introduce the Globalizer program to a new ASN member?

I would say: you are not an expert in the Fellow's field. You are the person who asks the "stupid questions." The first three or four calls are used to define what is truly unique about the project. The Fellow knows what they are doing but putting it into words is difficult. We help them do that. Once that is clear, the rest goes much faster — the template is long, 30 pages or so. You bring an external eye, a helicopter view. You meet inspiring people, and you help them. That is what I always explained.

How has your family been involved in your Ashoka journey?

My wife came to the early meetings when the community was small. Later it became more business-oriented, and she was less interested. My son Nicolas knows Ashoka very well. He is a rugby coach and trainer. He played for the Belgian national team for seven years. He coaches individuals and companies, using values from sports — teamwork, leadership, building on differences instead of creating conflict. His training is almost spiritual. Perrine invited him to train the Belgian Ashoka team two or three years ago. He shares many values with social entrepreneurs, especially those working with sports. He could be an ASN member one day, but for now he is building his own future. He also gave rugby training in closed centers for young people under 18.

If you had a magic wand and could change one aspect of society, what would it be?

I would create an environment where everyone can express themselves and give the best of themselves. Everyone should have the same chances to succeed. It must be universal. That is what I would change.