



# The idea of a collaborative competition – a case study

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the idea of an online collaborative competition for solutions to environmental and social problems. It asks three basic questions: What is a collaborative competition? In what sense are collaborative competitions collaborative? And in view of the social and environmental goals of the competitions, are they a contribution to sustainability practice? Prepared by a conceptual analysis, partly drawing on the arguments for extended peer review in post-normal science, and based on the in-depth analysis of one collaborative competition, it is argued that the idea of a collaborative competition is innovative and suggestive; however, in practice there is only weak evidence for collaboration – the competitive element clearly prevails. The innovation, in practice, is a new way of making visible and thereby promoting social and environmental ideas. There is some evidence for collaborative spirit, but there is only limited evidence that arguments for extended peer review apply. The design of the online collaborative competition might not promote collaboration as well as it could. Therefore, the paper ends with a discussion of possibilities for changing the design of the competition.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper examines the idea of an online collaborative competition for solutions to environmental and social problems. In such a competition a social or environmental issue is proposed – examples include drinking water supply and sanitation, maternal health, violence against women – and then anyone with Internet access can publicly post ideas for dealing with the issue and improving human lives. The search is for approaches that promise effective, even transformative, solutions to the respective issue. During the time of competition, participants publicly comment on competition entries; proponents can then revise their idea, respond to the comments or simply ignore them. The winners are chosen after this period of public online discussion and revision. There is thus the possibility for proposals to improve during the competition and even for new ideas to emerge.

Does such online collaborative competition work? “Collaborative competition” is a combination of concepts familiar from capitalist economies. In capitalism, *competition* is constantly called for not just in the economy but also as a means for more innovation, efficiency and accountability in other spheres. Also frequent, however, are objections to the extension of competitive mechanisms to civil society and politics. *Collaboration*, though used less frequently, is spoken of when competitors work together; for example, for the purchase of inputs of their respective production. There is also collaboration in science when people from different disciplines (and even from outside academia) work together for an improved understanding and way of dealing with social, environmental or other problems. Sustainability science as an applied science

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explicitly devoted to sustainable development as a normative goal is an example of such collaboration. In short, collaborative competition suggests a paradoxical mix of antagonistic and cooperative elements.

Accordingly, the paper addresses the following questions: (1) What is a collaborative competition? (2) Because the term is a paradoxical concept, are collaborative competitions really collaborative? (3) Due to the problem-orientation of the competitions, which look for transformative approaches to social and environmental issues, are collaborative competitions a contribution to sustainability practice?<sup>1</sup>

This paper analyses the idea of a collaborative competition within sustainability science, and includes a case study of one Ashoka collaborative competition to examine the workings of such a competition in practice. Section 2 introduces the social entrepreneurship organization Ashoka and its Changemakers initiative, which pioneered the idea of a collaborative competition. The next section explores the concepts of competition, collaboration and co-operation so as to clarify the societal resonance and relevance of the constitutive ideas of collaborative competitions, as well as the challenges they face (Section 3). The collaborative competition effectively offers a form of online peer review. Therefore, clarifying the elements of this peer review prepares the analysis of the competition (Section 3). More precisely, the competitions have a dimension of open, public and dynamic peer review, or so it is argued. Changes to the traditional notion of peer review have been proposed as central for problem-solving with respect to social and environmental challenges (Section 3.2). Paying attention to this design aspect of the competition helps clarify its role and potential for sustainability practice. In a fourth step, the paper turns to a specific case study – the 2008 online collaborative competition “Tapping Local Innovation – Unclogging the Water and Sanitation Crisis” – for evidence of collaboration (Section 4). Section 5 presents our conclusions and ends with a discussion of further design possibilities.

## 2. Ashoka, changemakers and the collaborative competition

Collaborative competitions were pioneered by the social entrepreneurship organisation Ashoka, a US-American non-profit organisation.<sup>2</sup> Social entrepreneurship is a relatively young field, even more so social entrepreneurship research (Mair et al. [22]; Nicholls [23]; Perrini [24]; Robinson et al. [25]; Ziegler [26]). A pioneering recognition of the practice of social entrepreneurship is due to William Drayton and Ashoka, the social entrepreneurship organisation he founded. Since the 1980s, Ashoka selects social entrepreneurs worldwide, offering them fellowships and network support (Bornstein [27]). Fellowships provide social entrepreneurs with the resources to invest themselves full-time into the further development of their initiatives. Ashoka and other foundations such as Echoing Green, the Schwab Foundation and the Skoll Foundation serve as the gatekeepers by providing support in three main ways: making small grants, providing expertise and consultancy, and facilitating peer networks (Grenier [28]). They contribute to identity formation: “This new definition (as SE), and the security such a role definition brings along altered my entire way of relating to and presenting me to clients and partners”, says social entrepreneur Korn [29].

As of 2010, Ashoka has elected and supported more than 2700 social entrepreneurs in more than 70 countries, Echoing Green nearly 500 fellows in more than 40 countries, the Schwab Foundation more than 150 fellows, and the Skoll Foundation 73 fellows.<sup>3</sup> What is a social entrepreneur? According to Ashoka: social entrepreneurs have innovative solutions to pressing social problems; they are ambitious and persistent; they do not rely on business and government for the realisation of their ideas; and they aim at wide-scale, systemic change [1]. The purpose of this definition of social entrepreneurship is a pragmatic one: fellow selection. Ashoka fellows are selected according to the following criteria: (a) a new idea (the knockout criterion); (b) creativity; (c) entrepreneurial quality; (d) social impact of the idea; and (e) ethical fibre [2].

These criteria recall the elements of economic entrepreneurship (Schumpeter, Swedberg [3,4]). Especially important is the emphasis on new ideas, not only in terms of an invention but also as something that has to be carried out and even scaled for societal impact. Creativity and entrepreneurial quality refer less to the genius of the inventor and more to the skills of organizing and implementing. However, there is also a big difference between social entrepreneurship and business entrepreneurship: profit is not a primary goal, and for many Ashoka fellows not even a secondary goal (the initiatives of many fellows are in this sense closer to the NGO than to social business). Accordingly, the question arises as to the social of social entrepreneurship (Cho and Young [5,6]), and the implications this has for the theory and definition of social entrepreneurship (Yujuico [7]; Ziegler [31]), as well as for collaborative competitions, as will be discussed below (Section 3).

Changemakers is an initiative of Ashoka started in 1994. The initiative presents itself as the “world’s first global online ‘open source’ community that competes to identify the best solutions to social problems...” [8]. As of 2010, the Changemakers initiative has run more than 45 collaborative competitions on social and environmental issues including maternal health, women and sport, drinking water and sanitation, and new media and tourism. “Participants in online competitions compete to surface the most promising solutions, and then collaborate to refine, enrich, and implement them” (Ashoka [9]). Competition contributors include social entrepreneurs already selected by Ashoka; however, the competition is not limited

<sup>1</sup> Here we understand the ethical dimension of sustainable development and sustainability in a wide sense, i.e. sustainability issues concern future generations (and intergenerational justice) but also current social and environmental problems (and intra-generational justice). One example for the latter is access to drinking water and sanitation as in the competition example below (Section 4). See also the classification of drinking water and sanitation as part of environmental sustainability in the Millennium Development Goals.

<sup>2</sup> For an article-length discussion of Ashoka and its initiatives see Sen 2007 [21].

<sup>3</sup> This information is available from the homepages of the respective foundations.

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