

By Ryan Abberley

«Going to the theatre, you find a job» The network that helps the unemployed

The world is going from one crisis to another, generating a whirlwind of frightening problems while the work of organisations acting on the foundations of society is in full swing. They bring information, training and assistance, creating networks of solidarity that, through concrete actions, restore hope. Amongst these, Ashoka. It is the world's largest network of social entrepreneurs, operating through the selection of projects by its «Fellows»: Men and women who can have a positive impact on people. By investing in the three thousand of them, living in 80 countries – the non-profit organisation offers economic and professional support, enabling them to transform innovative ideas and processes into solutions. Once off to a good start, the most effective projects are extended to other countries. The capacity to bring together and encourage the self-reliance of these groups is the winning strategy for Ashoka, founded by Bill Drayton in 1980. Inspired since he was a young man to bridge the gap between the North and South in the world and to motivate people to be drivers of the change that they want, Drayton has discovered through his experience that his clear and passionate vision encourages people. As a student at Harvard and at Yale Law School first, and then as an administrator for the Environmental Protection Agency and a consultant at the White House, Drayton has acquired all the skills necessary to create a management strategy that connects businesses, social workers and individuals around the causes need to be tackled.

From 26th February 2015, through This Works initiative launched in partnership with the Robert Bosch Stiftung, this detailed ecosystem is gaining momentum in Italy, with the aim of setting off the economic recovery in Southern Europe. Eleven European «Ashoka Fellows» met up in Milan at the «Innovate to restart» event. Seven projects attracted particular interest. Among these, the Ana Bella Foundation, a Spanish support programme for women victims of domestic violence; Boutique de Gestion, from France, which sets up 18 thousand new businesses every year; the German Discovering Hands, training visually-impaired people in the diagnosis of breast cancer, and Sandra Schurmann's JobAct, which uses drama to help unemployed youngsters to find employment (the similarity with Renzi's Jobs Act is purely coincidental.) Theatre art is here used to encourage self-esteem and a common language between different people; it develops creativity and helps to transform emotions, creating new ways to relate to oneself and to others. Its success confirms its usefulness at pedagogical and social levels: whereas German state programmes for the unemployed achieve a return to work on average for 24% of participants, JobAct manages 43%, with a further 24% who, at the end of the course return to studying. The programme lasts for five months. The participants experience all of the professions linked to theatre production, then, once given their roles, become responsible for a real production. The group, guided step by step, produces and stages a comedy. After more than 200 performances

with 4,400 participants in 80 locations and 50 thousand spectators, JobAct has created in Germany a network of more than 160 between training and job centres. Encouraged by these results, Schurmann participated in the Advocate Europe competition for innovative ideas to generate social cohesion and won it. The prize allows her to help other countries implement her idea.

In Italy this opportunity has been grasped by Florence-based association «Vivaio per l'intraprendenza».

How did you find out about the JobAct project? We asked Luisa Baldeschi, who works for the project. «It all started with reading an article four years ago. Helping women, young people and foreign residents who have to come up with a job, we are convinced that setting up one's own business means "playing a part". JobAct works by activating people's sense of responsibility. The opportunity to start up a partnership came about in Milan when Sandra Schurmann was invited by Ashoka to tell her story. When the event was advertised, Silvana Taglianini, president of «Vivaio per l'intraprendenza», remembered the name and went along to introduce herself. The idea of a workshop was quickly suggested. «Vivaio per l'intraprendenza» identified its allies in the field: Europe Direct, sponsored by Florence City Council, made some space available, ItaliaCamp helped with the advertising and the Tuscany Region helped with «Giovanisì», a service supporting the weakest in society to gain independence. The recently concluded workshop has enthused trainers, actors and operators alike, who are keen to support it. It's a beautiful but complex challenge. «JobAct» is based on the principles of German welfare – Baldeschi explains; its beneficiaries are those who have been out of work for a long period of time (more than a year), who have to attend back-to-work courses in order to qualify for unemployment benefit. In Italy, this type of benefit does not exist and those who are unemployed cannot afford the project. Furthermore, the artists working for JobAct in Germany have the professional qualification of 'drama teachers', something which we do not have in Italy. Consequently, with creativity and passion, we are working with our German partners to come up with public and private financial resources in sync with the approach. Florence is the first location. In 2016 Hungary, Greece, Spain and France will follow. Luisa Baldeschi concludes: «Ashoka is an invaluable network. It operates with transparency through pragmatic, collaborative and helpful young professionals. But above all, they are competent and quick» Ashoka's motto is: «Everyone can be a changemaker», that is anyone can learn to be empathetic, flexible, a team-worker, a protagonist in bringing about change to succeed in our world. Technology can bring us closer or eliminate us. It's up to us to make a difference.