

Aalto Societal Innovation Camp

Accelerating Societal Innovations

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The Aalto Camp for Societal Innovation (ACSI) is an instrument for addressing societal challenges in a powerful and effective way. What makes ACSI so special as method for societal transformation?

ACSI was co-developed by the New Club of Paris and Aalto University in Espoo, Finland. Since 2010 it has been run several times, in different forms, in Finland, in several other European countries and in the Middle East and South Africa. Most ACSI camps were run as real camps on site, but some were also in digital form. One of the characteristics of ACSI is the constantly renewing innovation community of involved actors, which offers an inspiring platform for co-creation of processes and methodologies. It combines an entrepreneurial way of thinking and working with a concrete process for developing ideas and insights. Participants from different disciplines and from different parts of the world gather and work together to discover opportunities for creating breakthroughs in processes of collaborative solution seeking aiming at producing real-world impact. Inviting people from outside, with different perceptions, experience, working style, language and communication skills, can also be a risk in innovation processes, however, skilled facilitation and ongoing self-reflection within the groups enriches the collaborative learning.

Supported by scholarly research ACSI has proven to be an effective instrument to understand how societal innovation





works and to create perspectives that stimulate societal renewal. ACSI increases our possibilities, opens new thinking, goes beyond the ordinary, and expands our insights into how to tackle societal innovation issues. In contrast to social innovation, societal innovation affects entire societies, systems and structures, and can lead to large-scale transformations.

ACSI in action

The most visible manifestation of ACSI is a three to five days innovation camp that serves as the base for creating new solutions and designing new prototypes matching grand societal questions. The energizing environment of the ACSI camp brings together experts, researchers, artists and students from different parts of the world to collaborate in self-organizing groups.

ACSI planning starts with the definition of the key themes. The key themes have often touched on the creation of new innovations and sustainable development, including ecological, financial and social sustainability. Once the main themes have been sketched, operators interested in bringing to the camp their own challenge or “case” related to the main theme are invited to take part. The parties involved have represented public administration, cities, regions, universities, large and medium-sized companies together with other communities and organizations. The themes in-



Aalto University Metro station. Photo: Markus Säynevirta / Wikimedia

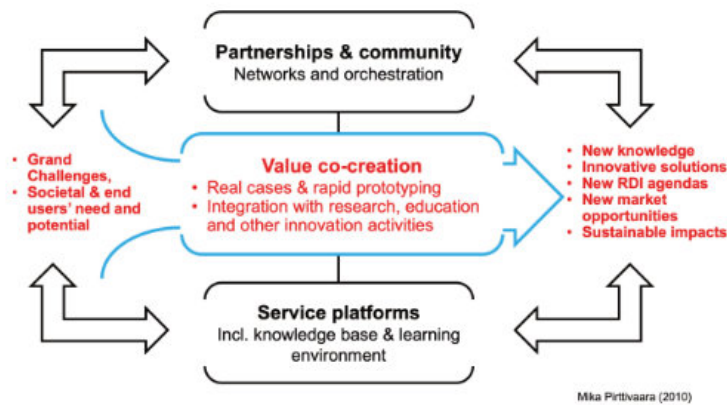
produced by organizations have primarily covered societal issues including city planning and ecosystem development, support for societal participation of the aging population, and new models of learning in working life and in education. Background research is conducted for each societal topic and prepared in collaboration with the top experts from organizations in the field.

An example was a large infrastructure project connecting Helsinki and Espoo with a new metro. The West Metro Corridor metro construction was not only a massive technical project, but was also seen as an opportunity to get the wider community involved in participatory planning of public spaces along the new metro stations through Espoo's different centers with the Aalto University Metro stop at the core of one of the ACSI cases.

Particular attention is paid to group diversity: the aim is to gather members from different backgrounds to each group to ensure a good ground for creativity. Every challenge has a dedicated case owner from the organization that brings the challenge. The person is responsible for introducing the case to the group. In the case of the West Metro, there were also technical experts from construction and planning companies, as well as Espoo city representatives explaining the financial and economic background. After having described the case and its background, the owner mostly fades into the background when the group starts to process the case. Groups operate in a self-organizing mode, following the principle that each participant inputs his or her competence and is open to suggestions from other members. Everyone can draw upon their own experiences or something they have seen, heard or read. It is essential that by integrating the capabilities and insights of different individuals, the groups create added value in solving the challenge.

Co-working, co-creating and co-learning constitute the main ways of working at ACSI, allowing testing of promising ideas in practice already at an early stage and further development based on the testing phase. The lightly facilitated work process is designed to continuously frame and re-frame the issues, problems, and assumptions relevant to a challenge. This leads to the creation of a range of new perspectives – new lenses through which the issues can be better understood – and entrepreneurial ways of dealing with them. If only possible, the aim is to turn ideas into physical prototypes, which facilitates communication about the challenges and their possible solutions and implementations.

The period after the camp testing the prototypes in their real-life environment with direct stakeholder engagement is an integral part of the ACSI process. Liv-



ACSI Value System Framework

ing labs and (urban) test-beds may be part of this co-creation process. This leads to more robust prototypes, to practical experiments, pilots and - with sufficient commitment - plans for fast-track realization. In the case of the Metro station at Aalto University, interactive virtual message boards and a physical library as hangout space.

ACSI encourages new mindsets

The ACSI method is characterized by new angles to routines or challenges and by critical questioning and problem redesign. Such new approaches sometimes serve as the key, or they can lead to new ways of examining and developing. The experiments conducted during the camp enrich the original ideas, and groups may even work on several parallel and competing ideas which are refined into new insights.

ACSI is a human-centered process, which begins when key people commit to take the results further. Supported self-organization drives the process and allows diverse partners to co-create new possibilities. Cross-disciplinary creativity, collective intelligence and prototyping are cornerstones of the ACSI process. The stakeholder involvement following through the process makes it different from many other camp formulas and hackathons. Focus on the need for concrete outcomes and societal impact after the camp builds forward momentum.

ACSI activates collaboration between different stakeholder groups to foster new innovations. The activities create a network and new forms of co-working, aiming to design concepts that will make a difference in many environments and that can be adopted globally. Thorough attention to the whole process – the preparation, the face-to-face and virtual interaction, the prototyping period, and the follow-through at diverse locations – contributes to its success.

ACSI's impact

ACSI is a whole lot more than just an innovation camp. It is a process that connects extensively and internationally the users, promoters and enablers of societal innovation. The global ACSI community forms a networked platform for co-creating, transmitting and researching societal innovation. The core operating mode of ACSI is self-organization, which enables the buildup of trust-based

networks and enriched interaction between the actors. In intellectual capital models, self-organisation and resilience are also described as renewal capital.

Past ACSI camps have integrated participants from more than 30 countries in actively addressing societal innovation issues. In this way ACSI builds on a global network of more than 500 people with ACSI experience. ACSI challenges have addressed issues such as realizing regional test-beds and demonstrators, renewing citizen-government engagement, and enhancing the innovativeness and inclusiveness of society. The process has been used to create breakthroughs in understanding complex issues and stuck situations, stimulate cross-border collaboration, explore opportunities for open innovation and help eliminate the obstacles that block it.

On the occasion of the World Design Capital year 2026 in Frankfurt Rhine Main, the New Club of Paris in collaboration with the ACSI community and other partners, is exploring to introduce ACSI process to the community actors in the city who have similar ideas about treating design as a shared civic process and creating new spaces and formats for people working on sustainable urban transformation.

World Design Capital fosters dialogue in the greater Frankfurt Rhine Main area around a unifying theme: design as a tool for shaping a democratic, sustainable, and livable futures. This shared narrative encourages institutions, communities, and professionals to see themselves as part of one conversation rather than isolated sectors.

Key ideas of the World Design Capital operating mode include elements of the ACSI method, such as cross-sectoral and cross-disciplinary collaboration, actors from municipal departments, universities and research centers, designers, architects and creative professionals, civil society groups, businesses and start-ups. These groups often operate in separate ecosystems. WDC aims to create structured opportunities for them to collaborate on concrete challenges—mobility, public space, inclusion, sustainability—building relationships that outlast the event year.

Similar to the ACSI concept, WDC is building networks and long-term alliances among the involved actors based on onsite and hands-on collaboration on pro-

jects or cases. The shared “language” developed together helps actors with different backgrounds communicate more easily and imagine solutions together.

More than two decades ago, the New Club of Paris created a unique platform for curious and forward-thinking minds, bringing together individuals committed to exploring societal transformation through the lens of Intellectual Capital for the future. ASCI is one of the most recognised tangible outcomes of this intense dialogue within the larger NCP community. The Frankfurt edition of the World Design Capital is an opportunity to renew and strengthen the validity of the approach. ■

*Your feedback to the authors and editors
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