

Societal Innovation Camps: An Introduction

ACSI – the Aalto Camp for Societal Innovation – is an instrument for addressing societal challenges in a powerful and effective way. It combines an entrepreneurial way of thinking & working with a concrete process for developing breakthrough ideas and insights, aiming at producing real-world impact. Participants from diverse countries and disciplines work together to discover and leverage in-and-out-of-the-box opportunities for creating breakthroughs in a process of collaborative solution seeking.

The entrepreneurial discovery process increases our possibilities, opens new thinking, goes beyond the ordinary, and expands our insights into how to tackle societal innovation issues. Supported by scientific research, ACSI has proven to be an effective instrument to understand how societal innovation works and to create perspectives that stimulate societal renewal.

How does it work?

During a three to five day Camp, multidisciplinary groups develop new ideas and perspectives on real-world challenges brought to the camp by cities, regions, business organisations, universities and NGO's. The work process is designed to support self-organising groups working in creative, open environments. After the Camp, prototypes of promising ideas are tested and improved at locations where the issues occur. This supports an open, co-creative innovation process in the real world.

At the Camps, participants from diverse backgrounds, countries and ages work together in largely self-organising groups. The lightly facilitated work process is designed to continuously frame and reframe 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.

The prototyping period after the Camp is an integral part of the ACSI process. Follow-through takes place at diverse and relevant locations, with direct stakeholder engagement. Living 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.

Why does it work?

ACSI is a human-centred 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 focus on follow-through and stakeholder involvement makes it different than other many camp formulas and hackathons.

There are dozens of innovation instruments and diverse methodologies for social renewal, and hundreds of workshops take place every year, often producing promising results. But many fail to move beyond the output of the events themselves to create lasting effect in society. ACSI has shown that this *can* be done, even when dealing with complicated and complex issues.

Focus on the need for concrete outcomes and societal impact after the Camp builds forward momentum. 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 is an international innovation instrument, and past camps have integrated participants from more than 30 countries in actively addressing societal innovation issues. In this way the Camps build on a global network of more than 800 people with ACSI experience.

ACSI was co-developed by the New Club of Paris and Finland's Aalto University. Since 2010 it has been run 14 times, in different forms, in Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands, and South Africa. Shorter ACSI-style sessions have also been run in Germany and Japan. Past ACSI challenges have addressed issues such as low carbon urban planning, 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 them.

More information about Societal Innovation Camps is available on request.