



**“One of the really neat things about Leaders Studio is it allows us to diversify who's in the room and who's growing from opportunities.”**

## **A Conversation with George Srour of [Building Tomorrow](#)**

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard**  
**March 13, 2025**

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Tell me about yourself and your organization.**

**George Srour:** I'm George Srour, Chief Dreamer of Building Tomorrow. We see ourselves as using direct implementation to guide systems change and prove what can be done. Our work is to make sure that we can get hundreds of thousands of kids literate, enumerate. Doing so with the potential to scale pretty rapidly in a way that relies on proximate leaders in communities to be the ones that are delivering solutions at scale.

Building Tomorrow has been around for 20 years. I co-founded the organization with the Ugandan counterpart, Joseph Kaliisa. We've been doing this together since the beginning. One of the fascinating things is that probably 10 years ago, some of the feedback we would get from funders was that we needed to have more of a Western staff presence in the country because it was always split where I was stateside working the funding angle and so forth. Then Joseph was heading up a lot of the work happening in the country. There was a time when some of the feedback we received from donors was very pointedly that we didn't have any expats in the country leading the work.

Especially over the last six to eight years, we've seen this huge pendulum shift, where now those of us in the United States are almost like an impediment to the growth that's happening. It's been fascinating to see how that framing and the work that we do, the way that we do it has shifted in terms of what is appealing to different folks. For us, proximity has always been at the heart of what we've done. We believe in local leadership.

We now have a network of about 15,000 community education volunteers. These are all local proximate volunteers who've raised their hand and said, hey, we want to take part and we want to be involved in this work. It isn't easy for us to get people from our team

in Uganda or someone of these community education volunteers to the venues or stages where people are making critical decisions that could have outsized impact on what happens in these places.

It becomes incumbent upon us to bring their stories to those venues and give us something to chip away at, something to hope for so that we can continue to get to a place where they can fill in. This essentially replaces my participation in some of these venues or conversations because we have valued that it's always been the heart of what we have believed to be important.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you talk to me about your relationship with Rippleworks?**

**George Srour:** The bigger engagements we've had with Rippleworks have been around helping. They helped facilitate a leadership retreat for us last year that was fruitful.

What Rippleworks does better than anyone is to make sure that the people that they tap to do and engage in these kinds of things are people who know what they're doing and what they're talking about. Often there are these well-intentioned people who don't understand the dynamics or the inner workings of organizations that are trying to bridge cultures and are working in the development space.

They leveraged this really big leg up for us. It became very evident early on because the expert that was brought into the fold was someone who had worked in the space before and spent a few days with our team on the ground seeing what we do before we had any of the conversations around how we were going to scale, what we were going to do differently and how are we were going to grow as a team.

Seldom do I think people who step into those kinds of roles take the time or do the things that they need to do to appreciate what's going on within the organization. That appreciation yields a lot of insight and a lot of productivity down the line.

Rippleworks has that leg up because they're drawing on a cadre of individuals who are vetted, who have already been down the road that a lot of the entrepreneurs and the ventures that they choose to support are trying to get through themselves.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How have your funding models worked over the last 20 years? How have things changed in terms of sustainability and government partnerships?**

**George Srour:** Our big vision is that government is the doer and payer at the scale of the work that we do. This is not something we hang our hat on because there's a lot of people in the space who hope for the same thing. When you look at the education space, especially in primary education, and basic education, the state is oftentimes the largest funder and the largest doer. If you look at innovations in a sense that have scaled, I would say probably number one is public schools.

Because for the most part, in almost every country in the world, there's a system and you can debate the effectiveness and how well they work. In terms of an idea that has scaled, it's hard to argue that schooling wouldn't fall into that category. For us, what we're focused on is trying to make sure that schooling, especially in the early primary years, is helping and creating an atmosphere where you're learning and that you have demonstrable gains that can be shown in a short amount of time.

The reason that's important to us is that we know how many kids fall out of the system simply because they haven't grasped some of the foundational keys that are really necessary in order to enable the rest of their academic trajectory. We also recognize that we're working in a space where you have a huge crisis. Nine out of 10 kids in Sub-Saharan Africa who are 10 or older cannot read, write, or do basic math. That's a really shocking statistic.

It's incredibly shocking when you think about the number of teachers that we lack. You look at governments, especially now post-United States pulling out of a lot of the humanitarian work that I had been doing around the world, it's going to be difficult for the public service in most of these countries to hire the number of teachers they need to meet the demand.

For us, we step back and take a look and say, you have an awesome resource right underneath the noses of most of these schools, and that happens to be volunteers, or what we call community education volunteers. Our vision is that every child can have access to literacy and numeracy if we're able to tap this resource of volunteers who are raising their hands in big numbers, at least from what we see, saying we'd love to be a part of the solution.

Training them and engaging pedagogy that helps get kids up to proficiency in literacy and numeracy in a short amount of time, we're talking about 40 contact hours. We think that has the ability to revolutionize and change the way in which public education and public schooling are viewed in some of the countries where there are the biggest achievement gaps and a need for something new to take hold.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you go into the specifics of the numbers and the subsidies?**

**George Srour:** I would say that's an active work in progress. Part of the reason for that is because in October we had just started working with USAID (United States Agency for International Development) on scaling this work with the vision of working with about 650,000 learners supported obviously by the Ministry of Education and with some funding from USAID. That's all gone. We still have a pretty heavy reliance on philanthropy to be able to prove that this work can continue.

Our current goal is to get to a place where we're reaching 15% of the addressable market in terms of the number of kids who aren't reaching grade-level proficiency in literacy and numeracy. Because we feel like from some of the research and so forth that

we've done that, that's the tipping point at which you can get some traction with technocrats and within the ministry to begin doing some significant cost sharing.

The work that we're doing now is not only to continue to demonstrate impact, but also to drive numbers down, and so our cost per learner numbers can continue to fall to what we hope will be around a \$10 learner range, and so we've got \$4 to \$5 to fall.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: The government currently isn't contributing—that's your next aspiration?**

**George Srour:** We do partner with the government in a lot of ways that are more in kind, if you will. I think it's important to make that distinction because one of the things that I've seen in our space is that the assumption is that if you work with communities you're not working with the government. Essentially it's either one or the other. Where we think that one drives the other. If communities are engaged and communities want to see this change, they're going to demand, especially at a local government level that government is active and government is engaged.

We work in 25 districts across the country, and we do have incredible buy-in, in a very decentralized system that shows up in the form of political capital that's being used to support the work that we're doing. Or a lot of in-kind offering of time, of resources, all that kind of stuff. We have seen in a couple of cases line items that have been put aside at a district level to support the work that our community education volunteers do.

That's a piece of our work that we're hoping to do more of as we grow to see more and more districts also put money aside to support the work that community education volunteers are doing. I say all of this just because I think it is important to make the distinction that just because you have a lot of community involvement or community engagement, doesn't mean that you can't be working or that you aren't working closely with the government.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What's the role of philanthropy in your work with communities and government?**

I haven't met too many philanthropies that don't want to see that you do work with communities and government. I think that that's probably one of the things honestly that philanthropy is getting right. This insistence or this desire to see a connection with the work that you're doing [and that it] isn't happening in a vacuum. I would say that's a place where we should probably pat philanthropy on the back and say, good on you for wanting to see this correlation happen. Your question was around what's the difference in philanthropies that can see the bigger picture and where you want to go. I think it comes down to risk and the willingness of funders to take risks.

The notion that our intervention that's been 10, 15 years in the making is going to be able to change a system is bold. It's ambitious. I don't think it's hard to envision, but it is a risk. I think one of the things I've found is, so much of philanthropy is very risk-averse.

People are looking around and saying, I don't want to be the first person to take a gamble on this person's work. Because it might be a pond of money that we don't get. Increasingly where philanthropy is also winning is the recognition that we can't just keep doing the same old thing and expect that we're going to moonshot or change how things get done.

I think some of our best philanthropies, and I would put Rippleworks in that pot, are asking us the questions around, what do you need to [accomplish] 10x of what you're doing? Don't get so complacent and so comfortable with a 7% increase in your annual budget every year, and then go around trumpeting that you're growing. What are some fundamental changes you can make to your model that will allow you to [increase] 5 times the number of people that you're going to work with next year and maybe 10 times in two years?

It doesn't always mean that there's a great answer to that question. The fact that someone is pressing for that distinguishes the philanthropies that want to see you and want to get behind something that's going to make big waves as opposed to something safer. They'll know it'll help some people, but probably isn't going to rock the boat very much.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do you see both touch points and requirements and trust in terms of your relationship with funders? Do you embrace it? Do you like more touchpoints? How does that show up in the work?**

**George Srour:** A lot of it comes down to an invitation to look under the hood. A lot of times there's this pressure that you are supposed to show that everything is perfect, and that your car hasn't hit any potholes, and your alignment is great, and keep moving. Everything's fine. Yet the deepest connections that we have from organization to philanthropist or philanthropy are those where we've said, hey, we hit that pothole back there, and this is what we learned from it. The next time we come down this road, we're not going to go that way.

I think trust is built when people recognize that you're learning from where you've been and from other people who've gone before you. For instance, this week, a funder of ours said to another grantee of theirs, hey, you are proposing to do something very similar to what Building Tomorrow already does. Why don't you learn from them?

That's a conversation where I'm thrilled that we can take part in it. I make it a priority for our team to get on those phone calls because that's a philanthropy that's thinking about how they help all ships rise in this sector. When you start seeing that, that changes the way that you behave as an organization. One of the biggest misnomers is that there's no competition in this space, and you have to remind people that competition couldn't be more stiff in a lot of ways.

When funders start connecting you to the people who are doing other work because they want to see their dollars make a big difference for the space at large, you're reminded as an organization that has its head down working on this stuff, that that's why

we're in this. If we can aid one another in getting to a place of overall success, isn't that sort of the mandate? Isn't that what we're trying to get done? Oftentimes we lose sight of that.

There needs to be more of that. We need to support this space. I don't think people recognize today the extent to which there's going to be contraction in this space. We're on the cusp of some difficult conversations, where what you've talked about in terms of being able to show results is going to be more important.

You just had basically 47% of humanitarian aid in the world dropped overnight almost with what the US government was putting into this space. It is going to change the way organizations and funders relate to one another. It comes down to trust. In a perfect world, yes, we love getting unrestricted grants because people know us well enough to know that what matters to us right now is producing impact. That's who we are. That's what we've always been about. If you're going to fund us, that's what you're going to get.

Whether or not that goes to pay for the rent, or it goes to pay for the devices in which we're measuring impact, you as the funder are fine with supporting whatever the need is. We also understand where there are funders who are a lot more direct and want to make sure that their money is going to fund particular aspects of what we do. In that case, we take that. We're grateful for it. We also try to move that funder. If we can, do some donor education, if you will, about the value of that becoming unrestricted, so that in times of crisis or times of change, things that we can't anticipate, we have some flexibility to do that.

### **Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do you track impact?**

**George Srour:** We're interested in making sure that kids gain proficiency, literacy, and numeracy at their grade level. That's something that we track. We've doubled down on that. We're also looking at what aspects or elements of the training that we do or the particular things that we're offering to help us create that impact are impacting what's going on. We try to be parsimonious in our collection of impact data, which is to say there are a lot of things you can track, but what are the things that are really important?

For us, it's really about making sure that kids are learning. All of that said, we've had studies that have shown, for instance, that our intervention helps make sure that the time on task of teachers improves significantly because you're augmenting a teacher with someone who can help take a load off that oftentimes doesn't exist in an underserved, more rural school. There are a lot of things that matter to us. That's where we set our sights as being the most important piece.

### **Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Have you participated in Rippleworks' Leaders Studio or Office Hours programs?**

**George Srour:** Yes, our team has done many of those. Leader Studio is more of a course that might be offered over a couple of different weeks. Then there's some other opportunities, Expert Office Hours where it's a little bit more directed towards an issue



or something that you might be working with. We had Office Hours with an expert that we were trying to get around chief of staff thinking, how we might orient an org chart and staff, and so forth.

I think one of the things that I love about the Leaders Studio piece is I'm very cognizant that a lot of the professional development opportunities that are afforded to organizations are for the people at the top. If you're in a top role at an organization, selfishly, you start to feel like you're getting all of the attention when I'm not the person who's helping make all of this work happen at the end of the day. Yes, I help enable it. Yes, I represent it, and so forth. As a leader, I want more of my team to have access to opportunities to grow themselves, to grow their talents and the tools that they bring to the work that they do.

One of the really neat things about Leaders Studio is it allows us to diversify who's in the room and who's growing from opportunities. When we take a step back, we look around, and we say, okay, who on our team could benefit the most from these things that are being offered in the top half of this year or otherwise? And then go from there. That helps us spread some of these opportunities around to other staff.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** In terms of the sequencing, did you get a capacity grant and then start doing the Leaders Studio, or did you get an unrestricted grant?

**George Srour:** Our entry to this was through being paired with an expert in a project that was around the leadership retreat and the work that we were doing there. It just happened that it worked out for the retreat to come together and all of this to happen the way that it did. That work wrapped up about a year ago.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** What advice would you give to people doing this now?

**George Srour:** There's a whole host of things, but one of the most important pieces is consistently being reminded of how important humility is in this work. Realizing if you don't show up with that, if your team can't show up with that in the work that they do, or there's a break in that, it becomes a really big issue and liability for the organization. It's important to make sure that humility is at the heart and the ethos of everyone.

In times of growth, there's often pressure to bring people on to grow. We just went through a growth spurt because of the expected work we were going to do with USAID. It's so important to just remember that you've got to hire people who have passion for the work that you do because you can't teach that.

It's important to remember that passion is key. Sometimes it's really hard. Sometimes you figure out how to ask about that. How does an interview happen where I get a good sense of whether or not you care about the work that we do? It's incumbent upon us and the leaders of social change organizations to think through how you simulate opportunities to better understand the passion somebody brings to enable and

implement the work that you do. If you don't do that, that's probably the biggest liability that you have because you'll never be able to teach that.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do you do this? Have you unlocked any interview questions or simulations that get you there?**

**George Srour:** We do things a little bit unconventionally. We try to reach out to references and so forth early in a process, as we talk to somebody because we want to use the conversations that we have with those people as a way to better understand the person and guide some of the questions that we may ask them to better understand who they are, what's happening, why they are interested in this. You've got to be very direct so that people know that you're going to call [references] much earlier on. It's not like something that's going to happen because you're getting the job, which is oftentimes how things happen. That practice has been helpful.

Making the process, I don't want to say difficult, but multilayered is also really important. If you don't care, you're not going to go to the trouble of participating in some sort of an exercise that I might give you and ask you for two hours of your time to do. I know there are a lot of competing thoughts, like is that work that you're getting from someone that you're not paying them for? Is that fair? Is it unfair?

To me, it comes down to this passion question and understanding where someone's real interests lie. If you prove to me that yes, this is important to you, then I can reciprocate by making sure that you are a part of our team, and we can talk about what that looks like and the exciting things about moving that forward. I think that being really slow and making sure that you're doing it right from the outset is important to be able to find the right people.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Outside of funding, what are the three things you think are most important for scale and sustainability?**

**George Srour:** I think one is probably morale. People need to call it out, and I think people need to be honest about it. I described to someone that we're afflicted with organizational whiplash. This promise of getting a lot bigger and doing a lot more and getting closer to that place that you envisioned on a national-level scale. When that rug gets ripped out from underneath you, that puts a crimp in a lot of people's mentality in the way that they show up and the way that they see things.

It's not because they've done anything wrong. It's not because the team underachieved, or there was some failing on our part. It was the fact that this just came from out of nowhere. I think the first thing that's important is you have to take care of the people who make the work happen. It's really important for us to call out as leaders that keeping our teams' heads up and feeling confident in the work that they're doing is not an extracurricular to achieving the impact that we all want to see happen.

The second piece is probably a much stronger emphasis on government relations and the extent to which the work that we're doing is in concert with the people who we expect to help take this on because I think increasingly what's going to happen, at least



in the education space, is you're going to see fewer bilaterals having a seat at the table, which hasn't always been the case.

Usually, it's a bunch of bilaterals, and they all have their own agenda, and they all show up, and they want different things from the people in the ministry. That's all kind of fallen by the wayside. It's not just the U.S.. We've seen the Swiss take down their amount of support for education, and I think it's going to happen in other ways as well. There are probably 20 ideas that people at the government or the ministry are being asked to take on. Are you going to be in the top one or two for them to listen? To be able to do that, you have to have good people and a really good strategy that you're trying to influence.

The third thing, because you can't forget about it, is impact. Are you delivering impact at a high enough scale with fidelity to what your programming is and a place where you can feel confident that you're doing as good a job as you possibly can? Because all of this is really in service of the learner that we believe should have access to quality education, and if what we've done hasn't gotten them there, there's no point in doing it. We've got to remember to be laser-focused on making sure that there are good things that are coming from an impact perspective.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Thank you so much.**

*Ambika Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is the Solutions Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer: She leads on innovation and technology, leverages communication platforms for the network strategy and creates cool content. She has an MFA from Columbia's Film School and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has produced content for Current TV, UNICEF, Havas, Praekelt.org, UNICEF, UNFPA, Save the Children, FCDO, Global Integrity and Prism.*

*\* This interview has been edited and condensed.*