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A Conversation with Tarun Cherukuri and Rahul Karnamadakala of [Indus Action](#)

Ashley Hopkinson
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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your work?

Tarun Cherukuri: I'm Tarun Cherukuri, founder and CEO of Indus Action. We are on a mission to enable vulnerable citizens in India to gain access to legislative rights that they're entitled to. My colleague, Rahul Karnamadakala, leads our impact and research work.

Rahul Karnamadakala: My name is Rahul Karnamadakala. At Indus Action, I am the director for monitoring, evaluation, research and learning.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is distinctive about the approach of the work you're doing, and why did you approach it the way you did?

Tarun Cherukuri: I started Indus Action about 11 years ago. The founding thesis when we started, which was slightly distinctive from the historical approach, was that we took what existed, namely a set of legislative rights or entitlements, which already existed in the constitutional mandate in India. I studied one of them in particular, and I saw a lot of potential margin for delivery between what was promised on paper and what existed in reality. There was a tiny hidden clause within an already ambitious law, but it was the world's most ambitious affirmative action policy. That's where I saw the potential.

Historically, a lot of civil society efforts have been either to activate new laws or to demonstrate lighthouse examples of parallel models, which could then be integrated

into public systems. Our founding thesis was, let's work with where the public system already is. It already has this aspirational ambition on paper, which is legislated. Can we actually translate this into practice, which was right from the get-go a belief that public systems can and should work for citizens in the last mile. If we really put our mind to it, that bridge is not too far to cross. That was our slight distinctiveness.

Now, a few more organizations do the same thing, but even with our compatriots and peers who are working on state capacity, what's distinctive and unique about us is that even though we work with the state, our center and locus is always the citizen experience. We've retained that character. Part of it is our own collective and founding DNA, but it's also the mental model we bring to the world. We want to work on citizen and state relations, but from a citizen point of view. Can we really understand the administrative burden that the citizen faces? [And what about] the last mile worker who's equally challenged? Can we actually solve for that interaction, i.e. the customer experience movement in the US context? In a lot of India, civil societies have shied away from incorporating technology or process engineering protocols as part of the toolkit they're offering. That's also slightly distinctive about some of the capabilities we bring in. We come from public engineering management backgrounds, which gives us the disciplinary strength to think about this interaction and contribute to the solution.

Rahul Karnamadakala: That's the best way to explain what is different about our work. The range of actors and civil society organizations that work on public problems are largely of two types. One is very boots on the ground, working with citizens to organize, collectivize and talk about rights. Others are those who work very much inside government, with assumptions and ways in which the elite think about access for the poor that feed into design problems. We are able to bring those two together because we have the citizen element, which also helps us talk to government about things that they do not see often or have missed or are unable to fully account for in engineering processes. The work we do allows us, and then therefore the government, to reach a broader and more diverse population of people in India who do not have access to things like digital competence and certificates that prove your identity or where you live. These things are very, very, very hard to get. Then there's a language barrier as well. We sit in that spot in the middle to fill up the state-citizen interface.

Ashley Hopkinson: Could you share an example of impact that helps illustrate how your work is successful, either recent or something that's stayed with you a long time?

Tarun Cherukuri: With an 11-year vantage point, one of the strongest stories of impact is when we started in Delhi. We started off with access to these education entitlements. It was a classic "feet on street" campaign. It was the most ambitious action policy that

existed on paper. The Supreme Court upheld it. We knew the Delhi government was going to implement it. We thought that demand would not be a constraint because this is about free and compulsory education for the most vulnerable from some of the best schools in the city. If given information, people would apply. We just had to build that in. That was the assumption with which we started a “feet on street” campaign.

We mobilized lots of volunteers, ran helplines, and ran community camps. This included motivating other community organizers as well. Say, for example, someone who was part of a school management committee had tried enrolling her children under this policy, but was unsuccessful the first time. We were able to scout for her and set her up. We were able to tap community organizers as well and provide them with an extra layer of voluntary support, digital support, camp support, helpline support. That led us from being a small ragtag team of three people into a large network of almost 1,000 volunteers filing about 15,000 applications. The first two years we focused on setting up this infrastructure to push out a lot of demand side pressure on the state to implement this policy.

One big realization we had after two campaign cycles was that out of the 15,000 unique applicants, only 5% got through to secure that seat in the school. 95% dropped out because the rules of the game were rigged at the school level, or else the state wasn't playing enough of an active arbitrator or regulator to make sure that parents had access to full information. [Parents] knew when lotteries were happening and what documents were needed to have their application accepted. In that situation, schools were able to reject a lot of parents. We got stuck in that entire cycle. Then we had a big aha moment, "This is not just a demand side problem. We need to walk upstream and work with the state to make sure that the rules of the game are open, transparent, and focused on equity." That's when I realized this is just not a community organizer problem. We needed to organize the state capacity to be able to open itself up to meet citizens at this last mile interaction where they're getting short changed because of power asymmetry. It was a big change in our work ethos as well.

That was the history and legacy of rights-based movements in India. As long as you did the bottoms-up field-based and demand side work, the supply side systems responded to the pressure you exert, but it wasn't that case here. There was only so much we could get, and it was fair volume pressure. 15,000 was not a small number in a state which had 45,000 to 50,000 seats. We had a reasonable share of the total applications, so seats were available. We realized that we should be agnostic about whether we do work top-down or bottom-up. Ultimately, children have to receive access to this entitlement. That was a big shift.

Since then, we've been working with states to fix the technology and the process, keeping in mind the last mile interaction of the citizen and the frontline worker. Just in Delhi, in year three it led to a tenfold increase in the number of admissions. We were able to facilitate 600 students to 6,000 students just in year three, just by changing that approach. In the first year Delhi had doubled the number of applications. Every seat got at least twice the number of applications. Every parent applied on average to about 20 schools. It was feet-on-street and offline. People applied to only three physical schools we had because they had to go door-to-door with a volunteer or by themselves. Then things moved online. Then in 15-20 minutes, they were able to apply to, on average, about 21 schools which was a sevenfold increase in their choices as well. We were able to clearly see that this is how this work needs to be done. We need to be rooted in the citizen experience.

Ashley Hopkinson: Is there anything else you tried that didn't work, and you learned something very important from it?

Tarun Cherukuri: We're just laughing because we have too many skeletons in our innovation lab. We have learned a lot. Obviously, there's a bit of grief that, "Oh, we didn't succeed as much as we wanted" or "We failed." Our ethos has always been, what do we learn from it, and how do we not go through that cycle again? One big learning cycle was, after we had the Delhi model, from the legacy of how civil society has worked, civil society organizations in India have always looked at themselves as movement builders, not necessarily like organizations or trying to build an institution itself. My thinking was always that we will discover what really works as a model. My natural thinking was, "Let me not scale the organization. I don't want to be in this pursuit of scaling in the sector." I want to scale the mission, can I open source a solution? All I need to do is find 20 other entrepreneurs like me across the country.

In my mind, it was such a simple idea. India has so many billion people - I'm sure that there are 20 crazy people like me. All I need to do is scout for them, do the hard work of raising the money and then give out grants and build a learning community. That was the working thesis from year three to year six, seven. One of the things we learned was it didn't work because we tried to be an incubator. We tried to iterate and then scout better and find organizations that already had a certain strength of community, and those partnerships worked better. We brought in the technology and government relations strength. In those partnerships, the match was slightly better when we tried to incubate new organizations. We were spending too much time being an organizational development support organization rather than putting our focus on one-to-one mirroring of the campaign. We were always going to be three steps ahead in what we were doing. Our incubators were always a couple of years behind in terms of the learning curve.

because they were too caught up building the zero-to-one stage of the organization. Hence, we had to pivot and go to more established organizations.

That was definitely a big learning experience. I was too attached to the idea of, "No, I will have this circle of 20 other entrepreneurs. They're easy to find and we will incubate them." We had to pivot after two or three cycles of that where we realized that we did not set out to be an incubator. We've set out to discover what works in terms of this zero-to-one cycle, but we can't teach others how to go through that cycle rapidly. That was a humbling lesson. We are still in the cycle of closing the learning loop, but we do feel like it's a hard lesson that came out of that exercise.

Rahul Karnamadakala: "Care to Play" was a very large collaborative effort that we were part of with four other organizations. The idea was to figure out how to support young mothers with early childcare development information and caregiving support, as well as nurturing the mothers themselves. We call it "cash plus care" which is the idea that you can't just give cash for the child, but you also have to support the environment around the child, at least for the mother and ideally for the whole household. The idea was to create a cadre of frontline workers who would be more like caseworkers. We don't have caseworkers like you have in the US, for example, that you can go to and get broad-based life advice, such as which welfare entitlement can I apply to?

We tried to develop a cadre of those caseworkers, frontline workers on early childhood development, but also work with a mother on giving her access to government schemes and programs that would allow her to support her family and help generate livelihood development opportunities like tailoring and things like that. We are undergoing a fairly rigorous evaluation of that right now. This was a lesson in taking on too much. There are things you can do with tech to make fairly rapid interventions happen, say, with a lottery algorithm, for example, or with creating data sets that are inter-operable between departments.

Then there is the work you have to do with people. For example, in the "Right to Education" case, we try to understand what the citizen experience of accessing the entitlement is, but here we need much more time to understand people's aspirations, their normative values, and the pressures that society places on them. Our intervention there layered on far too many things. Some things were successful, but things that needed more time - for example, livelihoods - we weren't able to give the amount of time and care needed to that part, but we were very successful in creating an environment in which the mothers would engage more with their children on learning, for example. Typically, these are low-income mothers who don't have the educational background or time to engage with their kids on learning and what they're doing in school. We've seen

changes in the confidence that the mothers have to approach a frontline worker to ask for access to schemes or to get their documentation in place.

One of the things we're learning is, what kind of timelines do we realistically set for each kind of welfare intervention? We hope we'll be able to see some outcomes from our livelihoods work in a few years' time, but we were a little bit unrealistic about how soon we would see them. We are entering work in which the timelines are a bit longer, as we start thinking about livelihoods versus access to education, or just the access part of education, not the outcomes of education. We are actively adjusting ourselves based on these learnings to settle into longer timelines, to measure differently, and to have different kinds of commitments to outcomes and outputs, not always chasing the big goal of poverty alleviation or escape from poverty or whatever because realistically, those are going to take some time. That might sound obvious, but it's also a function of how ambitious we are about changing lives. We were perhaps in some cases a bit too ambitious about our own ability to help women start new enterprises, which takes time.

Ashley Hopkinson: In addition to the longer timeline, did you also find the people power to be able to do this?

Tarun Cherukuri: Absolutely. In retrospect it looks obvious, but we didn't layer enough case workers or social workers within the organization itself. In the initial stages of the organization, everybody's role is a lot more fractional. Existing people were donning these hats as well. If we were to redo this, I would staff at least the entrepreneur development program more thoughtfully, accounting for the emotional labor required and the people-intensive nature of the role which would have required more hands-on attention to each and every entrepreneur. We quickly realized how much labor it actually required, but we also realized that it was actually not our forte. The real tension was that we were entrepreneurial in our own domain and in our own geography, and the instinct was look, don't reinvent the wheel on certain things we know really well, such as how to run helplines. Part of the expectation we had was to be a little bit more directive.

Tension was really in the ethos. We said, "Look, don't reinvent helpline operations. Can you reinvent something else in your local context?" The entrepreneur was like, "I need you to sign me up to be an entrepreneur. Are you not supposed to be a coach? Why are you telling me what to do?" We then realized that we are not good coaches. We were being a really active manager in one sense, but it was not what the entrepreneurs were expecting of us. Coaching requires a different level of intensity, a bit of ability to detach from outcomes as well, be really in the service of the person at the center of the work, something that requires a different layer of talent which we didn't get budgeted for or map. It was the same people who were accomplishing operations elsewhere, doubling

their hats and saying, "Look, I'm getting this done here. Why can't you get it done like this here?" Which led to the effects it had.

Ashley Hopkinson: Thinking about the support you've received, what has turned out to be a really effective catalyst that has allowed you to scale or operate more sustainably? Do you have any evidence you can point to about the support that you've received?

Tarun Cherukuri: Absolutely. Along the way we've definitely had role model examples of catalytic philanthropy. This is not just unrestricted capital or focus grants which we've had from multiple foundations, or even trust-based philanthropy. I'll name a few - Draper Richards Kaplan Foundation and Dovetail Impact Foundation were part of the Big Bang Philanthropy Group in the US network. In India, we had Ernst & Young Foundation and Rohini Nilekani Philanthropy. All of them have definitely given very catalytic grants in different moments of time in our journey. What was really influential about each support, (and a lot of them continue to support as well) is that they were very hands-on in terms of the organizational development journey.

For example, Draper Richards Kaplan maps a managing director to the organization who works very closely with the CEO to co-develop the board and build a governance structure and ethos. My managing director would have fortnightly sessions with me. I had full authority of the agenda. I really felt that every fortnight, I had a coach on my side. I can go to her with a set of strategic questions and challenges that I was exploring on how to build the organization. She was able to connect the dots for me, and partner with me to build the board, and take us through the scale journey. We went from year three to year seven. That was one big influential way where philanthropy dovetails with really catalytic advisory support as well. Same thing applies to Dovetail as well. They mapped a program director to work very closely with us, someone who's involved in our board governance, who spends a lot of quality time not just with me, but also on the fundraising subcommittee to mentor the next line of leadership. That's very catalytic.

When the fundraising head, and even fundraising associates, get direct access time to someone senior like that who's willing to spend time to mentor, coach, that really builds the organization capacity. Along the way, even though we haven't yet received a grant from Rippleworks, we've been part of their Leader Studio and a couple of cycles of Project Studio. Those kinds of projects have been catalytic as well. The first was on our talent value proposition. That's made us deeply think about the core competencies that we want to cultivate in our talent. Now it's become common vocabulary, the four competencies that we induct everybody into, and help them refresh from time to time.

We're going to the second cycle of Project Studio, which has been on brand refresh. We're just closing out that cycle and doing the brand launch. These are very deep

capacity builds for the organization. The ability to sit with us, work over a six-month period, and really get into the weeds at a very deep expertise level in a particular function, that's been catalytic as well because it's very difficult to source that kind of expertise. These were probably the world's foremost HR and brand experts who supported us on brand refresh. Even if someone gave us an unrestricted grant, we wouldn't be able to afford them. To be able to have that kind of service very intensely for six months, really invested in our people and mission with the entire leadership team, was very catalytic.

Ashley Hopkinson: You mentioned Leader Studio - which learning programs did you attend? Did you use any of the post workshop resources?

Tarun Cherukuri: I nominated some of my senior team members as part of the Leader Studio at Rippleworks. They definitely utilized the workshop outputs and the sources that came from it. At the same time, I had a couple fellowships, such as the Obama Foundation fellowship cohort where I got two years of very intensive executive support. It was very transformational for me and something I could bring back into the organization. Lots of resources, not just communications or executive coaching, but also a lot of mental health support during the COVID time. Now, I'm in the Ashoka Fellowship cohort, and we get active workshop support with technology and design experts because we are a tech and design-heavy intervention, to help design our intervention more thoughtfully. Along the way, across these different leadership communities, we've had really wealthy support in terms of access to expertise, access to a community of other entrepreneurs who are in many ways similar in terms of the challenges and the opportunities they're navigating.

Ashley Hopkinson: How does the support connect you to success, something that could really expand or change the way you operate things?

Tarun Cherukuri: Our teams are very good at servicing demand requests from a state. For example, we have a lot of state-facing teams and staff who are able to decipher the technological need or gap or vulnerability in the tech system on the state side. We've diagnosed the problem. We've been able to scope out very tightly the technical specs required to solve this problem. Then it's a matter of going ahead and doing it, but we don't have the internal engineering capacity, nor the deep pockets to find a vendor to fully pay for it. All we have is the advisory strength to go back to the government and say, "Hey, look, here is the margin of your fault line. Here are the exact tech specs, what needs to happen, but we can't build it out for you. [We don't have the capacity]."

Our developmental team is young, inexperienced, and will not be able to take on such high stakes assignments. We also don't want to put them in a line of fire, which would obviously place them in a difficult position, so maybe it's a responsibility we'll not be

able to fulfill. If we did have this talent, we'd be able to do more rapid iterations, like commit to a prototype and build it very quickly to demonstrate it. That gives the state confidence that, "Oh, I think this solution has teeth." We stop ourselves at that prototyping, but that zero-to-one prototype requires really good engineering talent, in-house. We just have that at one or two senior levels. Much like the government-facing problem where we have only four people, for every tech problem we have just one and a half persons who can really solve difficult tech problems at the lines of code level, the entire end-to-end lines of code. That's where talented engineers could help us go to the next level.

Ashley Hopkinson: Is there a funding model you've encountered that you feel has hindered your work as a social venture? If so, what was the main issue? What changes could have been in place to better support you to scale or expand?

Tarun Cherukuri: Yes. The Corporate Social Responsibility Funding in India - by law their money is available, but it's very restrictive. It's an annual cycle, and there are other constraints as well. The main issue is, the [funding law] design is around mistrust, both for the companies that are providing 2% of their profits and also the implementing organization. There's a heavy paperwork, administrative burden both for the corporation that is giving the 2% CSR and for the implementing organization as well.

To give one example, the financial utilization has to be completed to the T. You have to spend 100% of the money within the same cycle, even the smallest amount. There were times where we would be efficient and effective and save 15% of the budgeted amount, and we would actually get docked points for being efficient or effective with a program. We'd get called out for saying, it's against our ethos to just spend the 15% in the remaining time. This is public money. We want to be radically frugal and not overspend. That was the design constraint. The companies had their hands tied as well. They're like, "Look, we have to report 100% completion to the government." You may figure out how you want to spend this 15%, but you can't cross-purpose it either. That was an additional constraint. You can't move it across the budget line. You have to spend it within a certain set of line items. That can really tie your hands. It doesn't give you enough degrees of freedom for being innovative or enterprising. It locks you into a certain program and a certain budget Excel sheet, which is obviously very restrictive.

Ashley Hopkinson: What bold shifts do you think would truly help to center the voice of people closest to the problem that you're working with?

Rahul Karnamadakala: What we've thought about in terms of both the challenges that organizations like ours have, as well as the challenges with organizations or people whose capacity we are building, is that very few funders think about the organizational level of action. In the policy space, a lot of attention is historically paid to institutional

analysis, about big policy and rules of the game and all that. Then there's a lot of focus on individuals delivering frontline assistance, but there's not a lot that supports organizational development for organizations like us.

Also there's a lack of imagination of building not just the competencies or the abilities of individual people, but of people who belong to associations. Associations and organizations are a much more powerful way to think about how people negotiate their work and build capacity, because everything happens within organizations. I would like to see more funders think about organizations as a unit for funding, whether it's us or the people we're impacting. One example concerns the roles of each frontline worker. After they started working together, their roles changed over time and they devised new roles of their own. One became a bit more desk work-oriented, while the others were more in the field. Once you start thinking about how people actually do their jobs, the organizational level of analysis, it becomes a sort of quasi-organization. It's a productive way to think about it, because human relations happen in those spaces. Part of this thinking comes from academia and my public management background, but I also see it very much as a reality in practice. That's one shift that would be useful.

Another would be mapping the kind of change you want to make to the timeline over which it needs to happen. It can mean less money over a longer period of time, but at least it allows us to plan. We have too many projects that stop too early, and then we have to close out and report something in a hurry and just do not have time to see it through.

The third thing again is funding that is focused on asking for and designing interdisciplinary teams. That would also be a fairly radical shift, because what's happening now is that there's so much focus on data. All these people who work on doing data well are very good at the dashboard, they're very good at collecting data, they're very good at synthesizing and analyzing data, but for so many questions in our sector, for example, empowerment or the trust in the state, for all these fuzzy topics, the kinds of questions being asked are not that great, to be very honest. I'd like to see some sort of encouraging, interesting collaboration with serious academics and practice-based organizations in a flat collaboration, not the way it usually happens in the global north and global south, where the academic is sitting in the US and never visits.

A serious collaboration that allows for better questions to be asked would be a really powerful shift as well, to look into the timeline, the depth of the data, and quantity versus quality. We are in a place where we've gotten too fascinated by quantitative data and collecting it really well, but there's not that much clarity on what we are collecting.

Ashley Hopkinson: What are the top three things you need to unlock the ability to sustain this work, maybe even expand it?

Tarun Cherukuri: If a genie showed up, I'd ask for obvious things that are unattainable, like a favorable regulatory environment and a lot of unrestricted cash. [laughs] On a serious note, what would be really helpful would be unrestricted, or maybe [long term], grants. We still operate largely on annual or biannual cycles. Maybe 40%, 50% of our grants are on a three-year cycle. We don't yet have a five to seven-year grant cycle. Like Rahul said, if you really want to graduate somebody irreversibly out of poverty, you need at least a five to seven-year cycle. We want to get the majority of our grant portfolio between a three to five-year cycle, and we're on the cusp of achieving such grants. That would really give us a longer time horizon to think and act. That's definitely my number one - extended cycle of grants, and increasing the share of unrestricted grants to a three to five-year cycle. Ideally, a good developmental cycle is five to seven years to see transmittal outcomes in the lives of families. We would be able to think more deeply and boldly about how we can make a serious dent in citizens' lives.

Number two, the talent we most struggle to have on board is technology and product talent. The market is very competitive, and can't play that game price-wise, or compensation or enumeration-wise competitively. Some of the best models we've seen are the top tier companies loaning their motivated staff. That would be interesting, if the likes of Google.org, OpenAI or other big tech firms, could have a talent externship program, much like some consulting firms have, for talent to work on impact roles for a couple of years. I know Code for America does get that stream of talent from big tech companies in the US. We've been attempting some versions of it, but we've been largely unsuccessful. That definitely remains a big constraint. We could really unlock significant impact if we had the best tech and product talent on the bench or in-house. That would be the second big ask.

The third big one is, we do struggle with our public affairs. We're still a young team trying to make our presence felt at the senior level in governments. We work across multiple state governments. Now, we're in 12 or 13 states. The real binding constraint is actually senior management time, or leadership time, to be able to interface with senior personnel in the government. It's really me, Rahul, our COO and our government relations director, just the four of us to pull it off. That capacity needs to grow two-fold or threefold for us to be effective at the next level. At the moment, we're very good at the departmental level, but to really unlock that next level, we need not just 4 of us, but 10 of us, 15 of us, 20 of us capable of holding our ground in these conversations. We have a plan to build that capacity, but anything which could fast track that capacity, other than horizontally acquiring that kind of talent, is something that would be very valuable for us. These are three priorities.

Rahul Karnamadakala: There is a need for people who can do that kind of talking and connecting. Many large consulting organizations tend to bring on retired government

bureaucrats whom they can afford to pay very, very large salaries. Those become channels for them into the government. We do have advisors who play some of that role, but it's not a full-time government relations role at a very, very senior level where you can call somebody and say, "Hey, let's organize a meeting." One part of it is the personnel, and the second part of it is being able to communicate and to be in those places and rooms - not government rooms necessarily, but also foundations in India and abroad, where someone could present our work in a way that is on par with the quality of presentations there. We're not bad, but definitely, I can't come up with the kind of adaptive, fancy PowerPoint presentations that some of the big consulting firms can. The work is there, the rigor is there, but this stuff is expensive. That kind of organizational development investment in communications, there are very few people listening. That's definitely something that we would like to have to add to the third bucket.

Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you for your time.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist and editor based in New Orleans, Louisiana. She has reported and led coverage on education, immigration, health, social justice and the arts for 15 years in U.S. newsrooms. She's worked for The Associated Press Bureau and the USA Today Network and most recently, the Solutions Journalism Network as a project manager and the Poynter Institute as a media consultant developing training materials for journalists.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*