# “The scale becomes exponential”: Pooja Taparia of Arpan on scaling school-based curriculum and national teacher training programs by cultivating government partnerships.

**Alec Saelens**
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**Alec Saelens: Please introduce yourself and the work that you're doing. What is the problem that you're addressing, and how are you tackling that problem?**

**Pooja Taparia:** I'm Pooja Taparia. I'm the founder and chief executive of Arpan. We are the largest nonprofit in India, and possibly the world, that is addressing the issue of child sexual abuse, for the last 18 years. We are a 170-member team that has been diligently working to prevent child sexual abuse and heal those affected by it. In our country, one in five children experience severe sexual abuse. And with a population of 1.4 billion people, we can imagine what kind of staggering numbers that translates into. That's the level of problem that we are dealing with.

We all know child sexual abuse can have a negative impact, so Arpan's focus is not only to prevent child sexual abuse but also to provide therapy to children and adult survivors, people with lived experiences, so that they heal from the trauma and go on to live their lives fully and thrive. We run a school-based life skills program to teach children personal safety skills, and through that we also train parents and teachers. We are replicating this program across the country with large-scale government partnerships, training government teachers to teach children personal safety education.

It also requires a lot of policy advocacy work and systems change so that we can integrate into national-level and state-level curriculums, so that this curriculum becomes sustainable and children get it regularly over the years. This is Arpan's work.

**Alec Saelens: What makes your approach distinct? Why do you choose these approaches that you just outlined? Where do you take inspiration from to approach things this way?**

**Pooja Taparia:** We chose a school environment because it's a very structured environment. Access to children in a classroom set up is, I think, the best way to teach children personal safety education, because children are listening to you, they are there. You have immediate access to teachers who are primary caregivers, as well as parents, because when schools call parents to come in for a session, most parents do come in. Whereas if you go into the community and try and get parents to attend a session, it's been difficult as they are busy with their personal or work chores. So I feel a school-based approach has been successful.

What makes us unique is that no other organization in the world, as far as I know, has a combined model of prevention and healing in the school program like Arpan's. Doing lesson plans with children, and following it up with individual sessions with every single child to create safe spaces to enable disclosures of abuse, is very unique. Then those cases get passed on to our in-house team of counselors. They step in to stop any ongoing abuse and start with therapy for all the children who might have experienced abuse, even in the past. If there's any threat of future re-victimization, our counselors work with the family members as well to make sure abuse doesn't happen again. We use different kinds of therapies to do trauma processing and make sure children heal before we close the case and move on. I think this combined method of both prevention and healing has been a very powerful way of addressing the issue with children.

The systems change work, I think is really critical to have a large-scale impact. Unless we make our work sustainable, it's not going to last, and I really want to see lasting change. I'm committed to putting a lifetime of work in this so it only makes sense to make sure that it's sustainable and it keeps growing. We keep scaling, because India is home to 400 million children, and it's my dream to see all of them empowered with personal safety education. Arpan exists to make this a reality.

**Alec Saelens: Could you go into more detail explaining what you mean by systems change work? And exactly what are the strategies that you're putting in place to ensure that systems change work makes you work sustainable?**

**Pooja Taparia:** For example, we spent two and a half years building the curriculum for India's first-ever national life-skills curriculum. We worked with the education ministry and the health ministry. This is called the School Health and Wellness Program, which is a joint initiative between these two ministries. Arpan and a handful of NGOs and UN [United Nations] agencies built an 11-module curriculum to be taught in all government schools across India. We were able to put personal safety education into that curriculum and internet safety content.

Over 700,000 teachers and school principals have been trained on that curriculum so far. We've been a part of the national resource group training all the state master teacher trainers. As many as 80 million children receive this life skills program across the country today. That, to me, is just fabulous. When you put in a curriculum, and you do systems change work with the government, the scale becomes exponential. It's very exciting that possibly 80 million children today have learnt personal safety education.

Similarly, we've been working with a number of states for state level curriculums as well, because education in India is a state subject, so we need to work at the state level as well, because not everybody follows the central government curriculum. So we've been able to integrate it into Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh. We are currently in talks with Sikkim and Assam and some other states. So over the next couple of years, Arpan's looking to work with all the states independently for state level curriculum integration.

**Alec Saelens: What are the indicators that you look out for that indicate that your work is having an impact?**

**Pooja Taparia:** Lots of them, actually. For instance, we do a pre-post test analysis to track the relative shift that we see in teachers before our training and after our training. We constantly do evaluation studies to check retention in children. How much do they remember of the personal safety education being taught? We also look for application of skills. In an unsafe situation, is the child able to demonstrate assertive behavior and seek help? These are some examples of indicators we are tracking.

For our healing work, we look at the child's coping mechanisms that he or she continues to use, if required. How is the child feeling today about what happened in the past? Are there still any negative impacts that can be seen? How is their ability to regulate their emotions? Has abuse happened again? We also track how adults are responding to disclosures of abuse and are they more understanding and demonstrate protective behaviours.

**Alec Saelens: Is there a particular case study that your organization is most proud of, something that speaks to how you're able to move the needle?**

**Pooja Taparia:** I feel really good about a qualitative evaluation research we have done. We trained teachers in a group of five schools, and they were implementing safety education every year in the school. We went in and interviewed about 33 children across these five schools. We found that eight children had faced unsafe situations, and all eight demonstrated assertive and help-seeking behavior in those situations. I felt that that was such an 'aha' moment. I was like, wow—it's working.

**Alec Saelens: Could you describe how that works in practice, and how that information gets dealt with in order to follow up with these children?**

**Pooja Taparia:** When children disclose to Arpan, we start the therapy process. If it's a case of sexual abuse, then we immediately call in a family member, with consent from the child, and tell them what has happened or is happening, and develop a safety plan. We develop a safety plan with the child and with the family member. Sometimes even a joint session is held so that we can think of strategies of how to make sure the ongoing abuse stops. Or if there was anything in the past, but there is still a threat, how do we extinguish that threat?

We do psychoeducation with the family member as well so that they understand the impact this could have had and what they can do to make sure it doesn't happen again. We also tell both the child and the family member what the law is in India, the pros and cons [of reporting], and it's up to them to make a decision to report to the police. If they decide to, we will support them through the process. We don't divulge details of any of the cases to the school principal or teacher or anybody, just to make sure there's complete confidentiality.

**Alec Saelens: You have representatives in those schools?**

**Pooja Taparia:** Yes, through the program. So while we are doing the individual sessions, the disclosures come to us. Once we move out of the school, then they are not coming to us. We train the teachers on how to handle disclosures. So if a child tells them about it, they know what the dos and don'ts are. We also train the school principal.

**Alec Saelens: Could you describe something that you put in place that you realized wasn't that effective? And what did you learn from that?**

**Pooja Taparia:** Everything is a work in progress. As times change, as the environment changes, one has to continuously review the content being taught either to children or to adults, even teacher training content. We are constantly reviewing, seeing what is working. Now that more of the population is on the internet and mobile devices, with people in rural areas of India, we've started to create digital content so that we can reach more adults and children.

I don't think there's anything that was part of our critical program that really hasn't worked. It's been a lot of learning, reviewing, changing, piloting again with thousands of children before we finalize it. Even now, every three years, we review our content and bring in newer things that's in the environment so that our content continues to be relevant.

Our personal safety education program, in which we do the direct work, has turned into a laboratory for us. We have made a number of changes to the teacher training program that we have across India, in the last two years to address newer things. Mobile phones and the rise of social media have changed the way that people engage with content and absorb information. If we are expecting teachers to sit in a one-day training, how do you keep them engaged and focused? It's so critical and we are constantly trying to evolve our teacher training to adapt to people's preferences and maximize the impact that it can have. These are some of the ways we are trying to do better constantly.

The one thing—which was a really small initiative we started some seven, eight years ago—was we tried to see if we could make children ambassadors who teach other children personal safety education. We tried it for a couple of months, and we developed a program in which parents could be ambassadors and take it forward, because they would show interest in volunteering. But we found that [despite] the amount of time that we were investing in it to follow-up, train and keep ambassadors motivated, only a handful of people wanted to take it forward on a long-term basis. Otherwise, people were happy to do something small at that moment in time when motivation is high. And then we realized children got really busy with their school activities, college activities, and then they don't have the time. Eventually, after one and a half or two years, we stopped that activity. It was a small thing we tried, but the impact wasn't aligned with the investment we were making.

**Alec Saelens: Was it effective in terms of delivering the information? Was it getting children in schools to listen better and to understand better what the issues were?**

**Pooja Taparia:** Not enough happened to really make any such inference. I remember one child made a poster, and she wore the poster as her dress at a fashion show in school. I believe it got

a lot of children to come up and read what she had written on the poster about child sexual abuse. That was one thing that stayed with me, but I didn't see anything super amazing come out of that program.

**Alec Saelens: Aside from funding, what other challenges have you faced in the work? And how have you addressed these challenges?**

**Pooja Taparia:** There have been many. Working with the government has its own challenges. I think that's true for most countries. They have their own set of priorities; to continuously push and advocate is a challenge. You have to be extremely patient but once things move, it's just phenomenal. One of the most demotivating things is that you build a relationship with a bureaucrat and then in a few months, if that bureaucrat gets transferred, then you have to restart the whole process again. Those kinds of challenges are there, but largely it's been a good experience.

The other thing is the lack of trained people. We have to invest so much time every year training people whom we hire to do this work, because there are no trained professionals out there ready to just get into the field and do this work. Months go into training them, observing them, and giving them feedback until the time they're ready to be on their own on the field. Both for our counseling work and our training work with children and adults, it's a lot of investment in capacity building that we have to do. When people leave, that knowledge leaves with them. So the second piece is people.

The third is more an issue related challenge, not an operational issue. Our work requires attitudinal, behavioral change, and that work takes time. For all of us to be patient with that work, to be able to do that work, addressing social cultural norms, gender stereotypes, patriarchy, all of this in that entire ecosystem of behavioral change and attitudinal change. Expecting people to be patient and taking everybody along the journey is difficult.

Recently we've been having a lot of [child sexual abuse] cases get reported in the media, and I'm sure people are thinking, what's going on? What's the government doing? What are nonprofits doing? What are people doing about this? So I also sometimes feel like, yeah, there's a lot more to be done. The increased reporting is, in a way, a good sign, but it does make you think hard about how long it is going to take to really change the status quo. I have to keep telling myself and my team to be really patient. Persistent, but patient. This is a really big challenge.

**Alec Saelens: When you talk about the lack of trained people, are you saying that people who are taught at university level do not develop knowledge about how to talk about these issues?**

**Pooja Taparia:** That's right. Social workers, while they are trained on child abuse in general, aren't trained in the nuances of child sexual abuse. They are not trained on teaching children personal safety skills. They are not trained on conducting individual sessions with children. They do casework, but how do you conduct these sessions? What are things to be mindful of, the sensitivities involved? What are the dos and don'ts? All the nuances need to be taught by us.

Lesson plans are also created, age appropriately. Each lesson plan, we need to train them on. Do mocks in the office before they can go in the field. In the field they are observed for two rounds before they can implement on their own. So there's constant training happening. Even for counselors, while some of them are social workers and counseling psychologists, I find that trauma training is missing. None of them are trained on TF-CBT [Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy] or EMDR [Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing], which are the two important therapies that we use with children. So we have to enroll them into EMDR courses. TF-CBT, they have some idea, but again, you have to train them because it's a trauma focused CBT [Cognitive Behavioral Therapy], not normal CBT.

Plus they have limited experience in managing cases of sexual abuse. Most people haven't handled those cases. It's not just the therapy part of it, there's a strategy element too. How do you manage the case strategically? What should be the next steps? What do you tell the child next? What do you tell the family next? Because each case is different. So we provide a lot of peer supervision. Every single case is supervised at Arpan. So we have to train everybody.

**Alec Saelens: Have you tried incorporating modules about this in some of the psychology bachelor's undergraduates that people are taking? I imagine that could be effective to bolster the pipeline that you're working with?**

**Pooja Taparia:** Yeah, absolutely. In the long term, we plan to work with teacher training colleges as well as counseling colleges to incorporate it into their curriculum so that everybody gets trained on it. I also find that what you learn in college and what you start applying in the field and the training you take can be very different in the way you use that training. So while we plan to do this in the long term, I think it's very important to train people when they are on the field. The absorption, understanding, application of skills is instant.

**Alec Saelens: You mentioned that you also do training for teachers such that they are able to handle this kind of work. Do you find that that generates a legacy in the school institution that is effective over the medium to long term? Or do you also see the same issues where there is teacher turnover and therefore some schools also face basically the same problems that you face as an organization?**

**Pooja Taparia:** Yeah. It's the same problem everywhere. I haven't found any other solution, just look for the right people, keep training them, and a lot of them continue to stay at Arpan for a very long time. Many of our managers and directors today are people who've grown within the organization. A lot of them continue to stay, and so I've begun to look at it as a training center. People come in, you train them. If they stay, great. If not, I'm sure they'll go out and use those skills. But there aren't any other solutions to that for now.

**Alec Saelens: Going back to another of the main challenges that you talked about, which is working with the government. Could you talk about strategies that you've put in place to deal with the development of these government partnerships? What have you found effective?**

**Pooja Taparia:** It's really important to be strategic with the government rather than be an activist is what I have learnt. It's important to look at the government as partners. It’s important to have the right equation with the government, go in with the right tone and the right mindset that makes them look at you as partners who are there to help and support rather than point fingers at them, because that's not going to help. What's really important is to see how we can meet their needs, help them recognize what the gaps are, how they can plug those gaps, and how we can be supportive partners to make it happen for them, and give the credit to them as well.

I genuinely empathize with the Indian government. Managing a population of 1.4 billion people, running hundreds of schemes, projects and activities across various domains in this country, it's humongous. And when I've gone and met bureaucrats, I've seen many of them so busy, working day and night, still finding five minutes to come and talk to me in meetings saying, “Okay, what can we do together?” I have a lot of respect for them. They really do phenomenal work. It's just that it's so difficult to see outcomes because of the size of the population that we have. Even if they did work with a million, people will say, “Oh, but what about the other 20 million?” But that's not how you can really look at things. To make an impact on one million takes a lot of effort. It's a large number. So I really empathize with them. There's a lot of work to do for that kind of a population.

**Alec Saelens: Where do you come in to assist the government in understanding the nature of the issue? How do you bring in your expertise? What kind of tools do you invite them to use to understand the problem and what could be done about it?**

**Pooja Taparia:** We approach them and they already know about the issue. So we don't have to go into the issue per se. We tell them, this is the teacher training content we have. This is the data. This is what we could do for children and what this teacher training could lead to. And there is no teacher training happening specifically on this, so it is a gap. Teachers are getting trained in academics, but life skills is not something that the government is working on. So we tell them, look, this is where we can come in and help, and we can do the teacher training. We'll give the resource material, and we'll pay for training. You just get the teachers in one place and we'll come in and train.

They are usually alright with that because they also recognize the need. It's just that they have constraints, and teachers are very busy. They have a lot on their plate. We also ask them, now that states have started building their MIS [management information system] dashboards, can we put indicators in your MIS dashboard to track whether teachers are implementing personal safety education or not? That's a good way to monitor how implementation is happening.

Then we work with the educational body of the state on the curriculum part of it and integrate that as well. We encourage them to have a child protection policy in place. We share the draft of the policy and say, whenever you are ready, we can work with you and put this in place. But they're very slow on policy work. The easiest thing for them to do is organize a teacher training.

**Alec Saelens: You mentioned the need to give the government credit for the work. Could you talk a little bit more about that component of strategy?**

**Pooja Taparia:** Well, finally, they are the ones who are making it happen and I think it's important that we give them the credit, because they are like an elephant. If the elephant doesn't decide to move, nothing moves. But if they move, one step means a lot of work would have happened. I know that a lot goes into organizing and coordinating all of this, so I feel like the credit is due because it's only them who can enable this at scale. Organizations like Arpan can't.

Another piece is, for instance, the national life skills curriculum. Unlike a lot of government schemes which start and stop, they've been diligent about implementing this for the past four years. So kudos to them. They're making sure [funding] is reaching states to implement it. They have created a MIS to track, at the teacher level, which modules are being taught to how many

children. They've piloted and tested the app in sixteen states and are now rolling it out. They are looking at evaluating the program, which I think is phenomenal. I've not heard of any other country apart from India that runs a national level life skills program for children. And it has the potential impact of reaching 250 million children.

**Alec Saelens: What are the pressure points that you can leverage to shift societal norms?**

**Pooja Taparia:** A couple of things there. I truly believe that this generation of children will not have those kinds of attitudes. I think that by teaching children personal safety skills, we are building a whole movement of millions of children growing into adults who are going to believe that what happened to them as children wasn't their fault. Imagine having a country of adults filled with people who are not blaming themselves for what happened to them. Because every generation of people has been taught that you were at fault. Why did you go there? Why did you wear these clothes? Why were you talking to him? The entire blame has always been on the victim. It's high time we shift the onus on the offender. That begins by telling every single child, if something unsafe has happened to you, it's not your fault. I think it's going to be game changing for a mindset shift.

Second, there's been such a taboo about talking about private parts. I see that changing. When photos reach me from schools in little villages where teachers are holding charts of a body of a boy and a girl which we've given them, and are teaching children that these are private parts and it's not alright for anyone to touch, look at, or talk about them except to keep you clean and healthy, I see that as game changing. That's true for most countries. We don't talk about sex and sexuality. We don't talk about private parts very openly. And children grow up thinking it's shameful to talk about private parts, because nobody taught them the names. That's a big shift that I see happening.

I feel like this generation of children is going to be different. With the current generation, through our teacher training, through our parent training, we're trying to address the myths, the social cultural norms, leaving them as questions for them to think about. We have been running a campaign now for five years called Child Safety Week. It's a movement we've been building to create awareness about child sexual abuse, which we observe from 14th to 20th November every year. Getting an influencer or celebrity to talk about the issue and to address these cultural norms so that it's constantly hitting people through media, through these movements, and mass campaigns. Even movies nowadays, a lot of soaps and movies are talking about child sexual abuse. And slowly I see that mindset shifting.

But it's going to take some time because this is not easy to talk about or to change a person's mindset. Unfortunately, we've normalized so much of this that we don't even think this is not appropriate. For people to accept that what they've been believing and thinking for so many years is not really the right way to think about it, is just overwhelming for them. To accept that and to then change it takes time. But I see a bit of shift happening for sure.

**Alec Saelens: What are the teachable lessons that you think are important to take away from the work that you're doing?**

**Pooja Taparia:** I think working through the education system and enabling programs and initiatives by the government through the education system is the way to go, so that we can run prevention programs at scale. I think that works very well and we should continue to focus on that. And whichever countries don't have such programs, you could look at putting in such programs with the education ministry.

The second part is that I find a lot of nonprofits either do a lot of legal response work or some amount of prevention work, but I find fewer nonprofits address healing and trauma work. It's really important to do healing work with people with lived experiences, both children and adults, because healing is a part of prevention. If the child heals, the likelihood of getting abused again reduces dramatically.

The other thing is to stop intergenerational trauma. The only way we can stop that is when we heal this generation, because otherwise the symptoms of intergenerational trauma are going to get passed on to the next generation. Enough focus and importance should be given to healing, and training counselors, training people, building capacities of people as much as we can.

I tell a lot of organizations to think about scale. Very often we can build high-tech solutions which work with a certain population and we can get stuck with that. It happened to us as well. We built a very impactful model, then how do you scale it? What I have learned in this journey is that at every stage, you need to think about scale and redesign for scale. If you don't design for scale, you are not going to be able to make a large impact.

To impact the lives of a thousand children or ten thousand, to me, that's no impact, until and unless it's reaching a number like hundreds of thousands, millions. To me that is really addressing the issue of child sexual abuse at the scale at which the issue is. So scale, scale, scale. Redesign and evaluate again at every stage of scale and see whether it's working, and

think about what you need to change. Don’t hold on to what you've spent years creating, but have the agility and innovation mindset to keep reviewing and changing with the environment.

Integrity needs to be foremost. It's important to listen to the people we serve. What they want and need rather than what we think they need. We don't exist to fulfill our egos. We're not here to brag about Arpan. We of course take credit and tell our funders this is something we've enabled, but I think it's very important to be very focused on why I started Arpan. What is our purpose? Purpose needs to be central, and that's something I constantly communicate to my team. We cannot forget that. The other things just don't matter.

If you are here to serve children and the adults we work with, to prevent child sexual abuse, no matter what it's going to take to reach that child, I’m happy to go ahead with it. We tell the government, we'll remove our logos, you take our material, scale it. If you acknowledge us, great. If you don't, we are not going to say, no, you can't take our material. If it's going to reach another ten million children, why not? Our purpose is very clear, we're here to prevent child sexual abuse and heal. So anything that enables that in the most appropriate manner and in a way that we feel that's right, we go ahead with that.

**Alec Saelens: What do you think is most needed for the field to be able to move forward?**

**Pooja Taparia:** Putting the spotlight on the issue of child sexual abuse is really important at a global level. How do we do that? What opportunities are there in each country to put the spotlight on the issue? We should use those opportunities. The issue of child sexual abuse is still very underserved and is still a nascent, growing domain which needs more understanding, more research. Especially in the global south, we need more research, more evidence building. So I feel that if more and more nonprofits emerge to do this work, to work with the government, to scale, to bring the spotlight on the issue and develop programs and solutions that are relevant to your country and that can make a difference; we should absolutely be doing that.

The other part is, how can you collaborate? How can you come together, think, learn from each other, share resources so that people who are starting off now can piggyback, they don't need to reinvent the wheel. It's a solvable issue in small pieces. If you can break it up, understand what's required, there's no rocket science to it. There's a lot of work that has been done. Piggyback on it, take it, contextualize it to your country, and take it forward. If we can continue to create repositories and bring social agents of change passionate about this issue continuously to dialogue and to share resources and learn from each other, I think that would be very powerful.

**Alec Saelens: Are there examples of campaigns or organizations that you have taken inspiration from in the work that you're doing?**

**Pooja Taparia:** In India, the polio vaccine campaign was a phenomenal campaign that worked brilliantly. We've eradicated polio from India, and that, for the scale and size of India, was a humongous task. Kudos to the Indian government who ran campaign after campaign, roped in influencers like Bollywood stars, to be ambassadors for the campaign. Literally created clinics in every village to do the vaccinations, to make sure every child born gets the polio vaccine so that there's no polio patient again in this country. I think it's a brilliant, at scale initiative that I always get inspired by.

**Alec Saelens: Thank you so much for your time, Pooja.**

*Alec Saelens is a former journalist who supports SJN and its partners track solutions journalism's impact on society and the industry. In his former role, he researched and consulted on the connection between solutions journalism and revenue. He is co-founder of The Bristol Cable, the UK's pioneering local media cooperative. Before SJN, he was a researcher and coach for the Membership Puzzle Project and an analyst for NewsGuard.*

***This conversation has been edited and condensed.*