



## Learning & Reflection Session from Dasra

### Dasra is a social impact organisation based in India

Interview by Rimjhim Surana, HCD Consultant, HCDEXchange



#### YASHI JAIN

Yashi is part of the dynamic and high impact 10to19 Dasra Adolescents Collaborative team at Dasra where she works closely with young people to build their capacities and engage them through various campaigns and programs. More recently, Yashi has been closely involved in strategy development, on-ground programming & building a robust Monitoring and Evaluation framework as well as developing innovative mechanisms for meaningful engagement with young people and convening a Youth Advisory Group for the collaborative. Yashi graduated with a Masters in Communication and Development Studies from the London School of Economics and Political Science.



#### NANDIKA KUMARI

Nandika has 10 years of work experience in the Indian development sector and leads the 10to19 Collaborative's work on government partnerships while also working on internal strategy, NGO relationships, scaling solutions and MEL. She has previously worked with the Government of India's Ministry of Women and Child Development on building women-centric policies. She has also worked on public health research with a consulting firm in Delhi and with a community-based organisation for the rights of homeless citizens of Mumbai. Nandika has a Masters Degree in Human Rights from the London School of Economics and Political Science and a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology from St. Xavier's College, Mumbai.



### Could you tell me a little bit about yourself and your journey so far?

#### *Yashi's reflections*

I work at Dasra in the 10 to 19 adolescent collaborative for the last three years now. Prior to joining the collaborative I did my undergrad in journalism and post that I did my Master's in development studies. At Dasra I have been working in the space of adolescent health and wellbeing. My work started off with me being involved in communications and campaign work. Post that I've been looking into a lot of measurement, evaluation and strategy development work. Currently, I'm working closely with the government and with NGO partners to really see how we can create space for young people in systems and processes, and how we can find creative and participatory solutions to problems, leading a project that centers system strengthening and developing solutions for scale.

#### *Nandika's reflections*

I've been at the collaborative for four years. I've been in the development sector for about 10 years. I've always worked in this space. I began doing volunteer work in school when I was much younger. Post that I did my undergrad in sociology, followed by a master's in human rights. The kind of work I always wanted to do was around gender, flipping the narrative about who leads, and distributing power differently in societies. I began working with the houseless rights movement in Bombay, and then transitioned into the policy space to look at how women's property rights, land resources, as well as economic empowerment and mindset change, and how these things come together in government systems. Since then, I've always been really interested in figuring out what solutions we can build within existing government structures and how they can function better because I do see them as a very critical stakeholder for both scale, as well as sustainability. Ultimately, they are the ones who stick around no matter what happens. At Dasra, my work primarily involves figuring out ways in which government systems can be strengthened, both at the state and central level. The focus for me has been health. I have had the chance to work a little bit in the area of narrative change, youth leadership, which has been quite different and new for me, but I have really enjoyed it.





## Can you tell me a little about Dasra?

### *Nandika's reflections*

So Dasra is a 22 year old organisation now. What we as an organisation have always centred around is the fact that we are a facilitator in the sector. So we began our journey by playing the role of a facilitator between funders, philanthropists and NGOs that needed the funding. We provided capacity building support in both these areas so that funders give funding in a more strategic, meaningful and flexible way, and organisations have the ability to absorb that money, understand how their institutions can be strengthened, and build their own business and scale models. Through this work, what we have always done is kept the community voice at the centre as being the driving force for why we do what we do. So it's an impact first lens, but the mode that we go through to achieve this impact is through these two stakeholders - NGOs and funders. Over the years, we've had the privilege to work with a large set of organisations on both sides of funding. One new kind of stakeholder that we've included has been the government as a critical partner in creating social impact at scale. In the 22 years of Dasra's work in this space, there are a few thematic areas that we've built verticals in. One of them is the adolescents collaborative which is the oldest one, the other is urban sanitation and faecal sludge management, which is also linked to our work on climate. We also work on the issue of migrant workers, especially women migrant workers, as well as with vulnerable children and how we can think of institutionalising them. Other than this, all the work that we do is cause agnostic, and is very much on the side of continuing the work that Dasra has been known for, of channelling effective funds into the sector, and supporting organisations and NGOs at the community level, to be able to use that effectively to create social impact.



## How does Dasra understand and define HCD and what role does it play in the work that you do?

### *Yashi's reflections*

From my understanding of how I view the work that we do at the 10 to 19 collaborative we involve the stakeholders that we work with and not look at them from a beneficiary lens but look at them as collaborators in the process. That's how I look at HCD. The process of how we do human centred design, is really working with each other to do the entire process from understanding the gaps to creating the solution. Generally, what happens in the sector is you just go to young people to understand the gaps, and then come back and do your own solutioning, and then you go to them again to roll out the solution from a beneficiary lens. You're just in and out in that start point and endpoint, and really, there's nothing happening in the middle with them. But how I see at HCD and how we implement is to think about how we can take them along through the entire journey of not just understanding gaps with them, but also then working with them, bringing them to the table to really talk about solutions, testing the solutions with them, understanding nuances of the problems, and working that into the solutions. We try to create spaces where they [young people] really recommend solutions to us. That's how I would define it in the work that we do.



How I see HCD and how we implement is to think about how we can take young people along through the entire journey of not just understanding gaps with them, but also then working with them, bringing them to the table to really talk about solutions, testing the solutions with them, understanding nuances of the problems, and working that into the solutions.



### *Nandika's reflections*

I agree completely with what Yashi said. In the 10 to 19 collaborative it's been about putting the young person at the centre and solving from that point outwards. But I don't think we necessarily followed HCD from day one in a very intentional manner. It's been more about a beneficiary first or adolescent first approach and we've not had the language or the framework necessarily to formally be able to call it HCD but I think it's very much the nature of the work that we've done. The second thing I wanted to bring up, which is a slightly different point is that apart from the young person, the kinds of engagements we do with our other stakeholders like funders, government, NGOs are also very stakeholder specific and they are created in a way where we go deep into trying to understand what they need from the collaborative. We have relationship building strategies. For example, with the government, we spent the first year and a half just having open-ended conversations to understand their priorities and what kind of things are useful for them? What kind of partner would be most effective for them? From that we visit our actual strategy of how we want to engage them. The government is one example but it's the same with funders and with NGOs. So partnership conversations for us always begin very open and then based entirely on what the stakeholder working with needs or finds most interesting, we begin to build the journey for how they could come into the collaborative as being an equal member or a collaborator with us. So I think there is also something to be said about that approach being very central to the way in which we work, which I feel is quite unusual because that means we are not putting across our own organisational mandate. We are building off from what's needed in the sector.



## At what point do you think HCD became a part of the Dasra vocabulary? And how do you use that process?

### *Nandika's reflections*

About 3 years back is probably when we formally started using HCD as a term - just before COVID. That was around when we began working on an approach called the Component Approach, which we are using to strengthen a government run intervention called adolescent health and wellness day (AHWD) that happens in villages. The second was WIFS, which is the weekly iron folic acid supplementation programme. The first time, I think we formally used it is when we did prototyping and workshops and all of that. We had a few team members who trained themselves on it and took over the responsibility of doing it in 2019. From there on, we've used the approach more formally for both projects. So before the project actually wrapped up after the point of doing a gap analysis, we didn't go into implementation because of COVID and other funding reasons. But we did put together this gap analysis based on an HCD analysis and a workshopping process. The Adolescent Health and Wellness Days that we are now working on, the team was trained by a design firm in Mumbai, India. They were the ones who trained the rest of the team on how to apply this approach to the project and took us through a bit of the HCD process. We then adapted that to apply to our project. We use the approaches when we revise the standard operating procedures of the AHWD event, and when we revise our solution.

The other third place we've used it is in a separate kind of satellite project vertical called the Youth Coalition with the brand name is 'Youth Ke Bol'. So they were developing a strategy for three years. In this strategy development process, they did a series of consultations with young people to understand what it is that they want from an initiative like Youth ke Bol, and IDEO was brought on board to help take us through that design thinking process with the cohort of young people who provided input on it and helped us create the strategy for that entire initiative. The strategy has now been launched this year, and it has another three years to run.

## Since you have worked with two design studios, I would like to understand your relationship with them as an organisation working with a design studio? What were some of the challenges that you faced, and what were things you really appreciated?



### *Yashi's reflections*

I can start with the relationship with the design firm in Mumbai, India that trained the team. The idea of bringing on a design firm was more for training. It was a three day training session that they did for us because we realised we needed to learn a little bit more about how to formally do the HCD process and potentially be better facilitators, because Dasra's role really is to be that facilitator in youth solution projects. We were hoping to use those skills in the way we do our facilitation going forward with various kinds of stakeholders. The challenges with actually practising some of the processes was, while we did learn a lot of the things, HCD in that sense is very mindset driven, rather than a process according to me - at least that's what my learning was in the entire learning process, that there isn't necessarily a mandated manner in which you do HCD. It's more about how we can be human centred in our mindset and that's what we're really using in our project. Currently, if you ask me, if we are really using the step by step HCD process, I would say, probably not. However, we are really using that mindset of being human centred, and the process of testing things and coming back to the table to ideate some more after having learned from testing. More and more, we see ourselves really benefiting from the process but it's still a learning journey for everyone.

## You spoke about the training that you received from a design firm - How was that? Could some things have been done differently for the Dasra team to have learned HCD better?



### *Yashi's reflections*

It was a 3 day training session and in that much time a lot of one way communication can happen. I think we could think about how we can make it just more easy to grasp and actually use it during the training? If it was a five day or seven day training, we could have actually practically used it and maybe we could shadow the designers to really understand the project, and have the designers dive into the project and help us in real time. But since it's a limited time, the training was more theoretical. It was more on us to really see how we want to use it in our projects on a day to day basis, which is a constant and an everyday learning. Often these longer investments of time and money present a challenge in the nonprofit sector and it's worth exploring how to make HCD more accessible to this sector.



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## You also mentioned working with another design studio in a different capacity. Could you tell me more about that?

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### *Nandika's reflections*

That was a longer-term engagement and also a much bigger investment in terms of budget. So with the first design studio, we didn't have money to have a design firm be part of the whole process. However, for the other design firm we had a budget. This was for the Youth Ke Bol initiative which is an effort to build a narrative around how contraception for young people is a central part for them to achieve quality of life. The aim of Youth Ke Bol is to demedicalize the conversation around contraception, and use 'quality of life' hooks, so things like employability, freedom of movement, etc., which are markers of quality of life. What we needed to land on was, how do young people really want to consume this information because the initiative is supposed to be by and for young people. The strategy of the initiative is that we mobilise 1 million young people online and offline, to be able to push out this kind of narrative. So we began working with the design studio, saying that this is kind of what we think we want to do, which is this quality of life and contraception linkage, but we don't know what young people want. We also don't want to build out a campaign message, or a project initiative without knowing what they need, and what kind of fits their current status. So they helped us bring together this cohort of young people in a series of workshops. We connected the youth to them but they are the ones who actually conducted the workshop. In organising the workshop we compensated for young people for their time. We did all that we could as a facilitator, and one of the participants in the workshop came up with an idea that was the one that kind of took us through the entire process. At the end of it, we landed on a central narrative for what this entire Youth Ke Bol initiative would look like, and what the central message would be? And what different kinds of verticals needed to exist? Etc.



## Have you faced any organisational challenges in working with design studios or challenges in the outputs that you are given by the design studio, or just challenges in the process of working?

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### *Yashi's reflections*

For us to also recognise that our challenges with social impact are something that can be solved using HCD took us a while. It's only in the last 3 years that we have started to invest in HCD and understand if we can really use HCD as a way of doing things and build the team's capacity on it. So I think just the understanding that this is something where we can bring in a designer and use that methodology has been slow and then just communicating that to get buy-in from everyone on the team. You do that three day learning but then there are questions around what will really come out of it because there's no tangible output immediately. For example, we did this three day training but are not able to show immediate results on it. When I look back, after a year, I will be able to possibly talk about and identify the impact because of HCD and because of the learnings we will have. Because it's not very easy to show tangible results, it can become difficult to convince even your own internal project teams.

### *Nandika's reflections*

It's really expensive to get an external agency to come and do this for you. So for us, one of the design firms gave us a huge discount from the goodness of their heart but it was still expensive for us. At the beginning, it was very hard for us to justify why we are paying a for profit vendor, when we could very well be putting that money directly into communities or into an NGO that is closer to the community. So it's very very difficult for an NGO to justify high costs for conducting HCD. So building internal capacity for it is the way that we found to go about this. So the training that we did was an effort towards doing that because we simply can't justify paying lakhs and lakhs to design firms to do HCD for us. Instead, we let them train us over three to four days, and then we thought we would do it ourselves. That's not obviously the most effective because HCD is also not something you can just pick up easily. That is a huge challenge.



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### *Yashi's reflections*

Finding the right kind of partner agencies is also important when we were hoping to work with an HCD firm. At the time there was not a lot of choice and we had limited options. We got a discount from a studio that has a very nuanced understanding of the social impact space, and was willing to actually do the work with us.



## Moving a little bit more into your role as the facilitator now - What are the difficulties that you face working with more grassroots organisations or organisations that are implementing some of these solutions when you have to relay this way of working to them?

### *Yashi's reflections*

What I understood about the HCD process when I did the training is it's supposed to be a very "proper" way of doing things. It's very difficult to do it practically in that manner. It's very difficult to be prescriptive. That just does not work practically. So how can you make it flexible was one thing that's constantly been on my mind in terms of, you know, how can you be true to the process but at the same time, don't be so rigid in the process of how you use it. Because sometimes you don't have the time to do it in a linear manner. How do you squeeze in all of the steps of the process in one month? That's something that I'm struggling with right now. So I know I've learned HCD, I know I'm trying to implement it as well with that mindset in place but I know I'm not doing justice to the entire two or three month process because I need to do it in less time. I can't actually give it the time it needs.



## For organisations that you work with who may not necessarily be clued in with the process or the mindset, Do you do some sort of orientation or training or just something to relay ways of working?

### *Nandika's reflections*

For people that don't take to HCD very naturally, it feels like an extra thing that they're doing outside of what's required. I would compare it to what MEL used to be about five to seven years ago. It used to be like let's do the work, why are we only talking about how to measure the impact. It used to not be considered a key part of the program. Now that has changed. Everyone understands the importance of MEL and we go headfirst into it and enough budgets are allocated to that. So I think HCD has yet to reach that point when it comes to the social sector, because people are just beginning to see the actual value of what it can bring in for solution thinking. So with organisations that we work with, we're asking them to give us time which is outside of regular work. That's sometimes a challenge. So we have to temper it a bit - like we have asked them for one consultation this month, that means next month, we can't ask them for a webinar, and that means I have to push my next activity to December because their time is valuable. And time means money basically.

The second thing is the orientation and the patience to sit through something like this, that's not bad, actually. Once people are there, they are there, and they're willing to go through the journey with you. They're willing to adhere to the process. It's not like they lose patience or anything like that. So the learning has been that, once they show up and if they're compensated well enough for their effort and I don't mean financially, they also appreciate it if it's built into their project, they're expecting it and have been told in advance and all of that. Basically, if their time was respected and planned for, then people are pretty open, honestly. A kind of value add they see many times after closing on an engagement like this and similar ones, where they feel like they like to associate with organisations like Dasra or similar, because this is where they might get to move away from regular programming and reflect on some things. I do think people see the value of it but that initial initiative and push is hard.



## Do you have strategies you have found to be useful to be able to do that?

### *Nandika's reflections*

So a couple of these things like planting it into the project. So if there are grantee partners, plan it into their project as much as possible, and help them understand when this will happen, how much time and effort it will take etc. So the planning and prediction of it is one step. I think the second is in acknowledging that it's a central part of the project and the expectation is that they will do this. And then lastly, I will say that bringing them together in a way where they are able to take away something for their own organisations, and not just like having them be part of our process is a pretty effective strategy. So then they feel like they got something back - either they were able to discuss a case study from their own NGO or something. So it's not just them giving input but also taking away something.

### *Yashi's reflections*

I think it's also about not labelling it so much as you know the HCD process. It's more about building it into the actual project timeline and work and just making it a natural way of doing things and building it into the ethos of the project itself. I think that has been very key. Then it just starts to become a natural way of working for everyone in the project - not just Dasra, but all of the collaborators in the project. That's how they will start to function then - like, okay, yes, we'll come to the table and co-create, and they will build it into their timeline to do that. So it's almost like initially, you will have to make the push, but then it eventually starts to become a process and an ethos and our thing for everyone.



## Can you talk about any one project that uses the HCD process, and what that journey has been like?

### *Yashi's reflections*

So [the component approach](#) borrows from the idea of the HCD process - there is a little bit of how we can keep young people in the centre and work with them to come up with solutions. How we use this [in the project](#) is the phases in which we do it, which is really first understanding the problems then solutioning for it, then testing it, and then again solutioning for it, and then finally testing it and handing it over - that is a version of the HCD process in a way. And so I think till now we've been able to do justice to it in terms of really involving young people and really doing the testing, really coming to the table together to understand the gaps and all of those steps and processes. I would say we're in the middle of a cycle. By the end of the project, we'll be able to really look back and see how much justice we were able to really do to the entire process. But yeah, I think that is one project that majorly relies on the entire HCD mindset and the steps.



## Are there ways in which the HCD process has helped with meaningful youth engagement or in increasing youth participation simply because of tools that you're using or activities that you're doing. Have you found any ways to be able to evaluate the effectiveness of HCD or like metrics that you feel like speak to that?

### *Yashi's reflections*

We've tried to break it down into indicators that are actually measurable and you can, in a way, do a little bit of that attribution to HCD. So to give you an example, what we ask ourselves in our MEL framework when we evaluate our projects is 'were we participatory?', 'how involved were young people?', 'did we involve our young people advisory group?', 'what is the involvement of the stakeholders', and a few more that form a part of our indicator list, and that really helps us identify how participatory we were, and then we sort of make that linkage about how successful the HCD process was for us. In this project we are also closely monitoring our learnings and reflections on everything that we're doing in a step by step manner. We are doing regular consultations with our partners, to understand if these processes have actually been participatory. And we are realising the benefit of it, and how the project is benefiting from it. So just some of those qualitative reflections on our end of how much of a difference it actually makes when you use the process versus when you don't might be a measure. It's not proper MEL in that sense, but it is a learning that we have, which we will document in some way.



## Finally to end on a light note, can you tell me one favourite memory or experience that you had either working on this project or just working on any project that has used the human centred design approach?

### *Yashi's reflections*

It was really nice to see that after the engagement with the design firm, what came out of the workshops, what young people really said, the messaging really came out strongly for the entire 'Youth Ke Bol' work. That's really the central messaging that they're using right now and it was really powerful to see how that entire process was centred around young people, and they led the entire piece. Now that's what's being used. The narrative building that happened was really inspiring!

### *Nandika's reflections*

When the team that got trained by the design firm for the Ab Meri Baari project, went ahead and passed on that training to the rest of us and they made us go through some parts of the projects. I think just seeing everybody's eyes light up with realisation when we went into some of the activities where we had to take on the role of one stakeholder and we tried to break down the challenge and understand how stakeholders saw the project. The shift in the way that you look at it from a stakeholder lens was amazing!

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