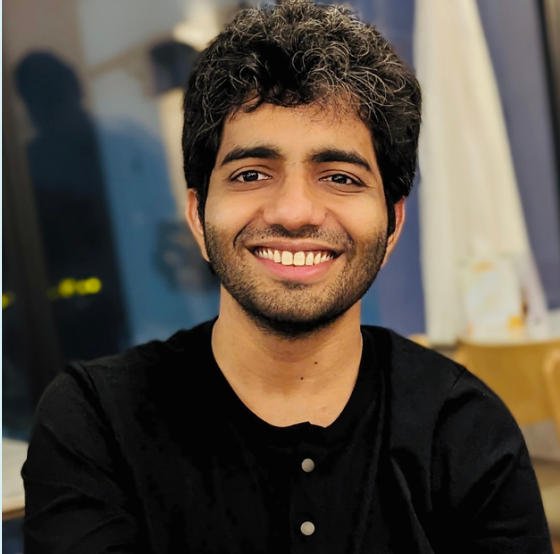# Learning & Reflections on Using HCD in the Development Sector

About ALT Unfold

Alt Unfold is envisioned to be a workspace for young professionals to collaborate and design alternative approaches while programming for social change.

Interview by Swarali Pandare, Design Associate, HCDExchange

Harsh Chauhan

Harsh is a queer feminist development professional with over 6 years of experience in programming and advocacy on early childhood development, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and youth leadership building. Prior to co-founding Alt Unfold, Harsh worked with The YP Foundation (New Delhi) and Centre for Learning Resources (Chattisgarh) on community-focused initiatives across multiple verticals. He has also been actively involved in advocacy at different national and international fora such as the WHO's global campaign to combat ageism, United Nations' HRC and UPR mechanisms, and the PMNCH Partners' forum.

Harsh believes that interventions should always speak to the lived realities of the end user. He strives to design tools and strategies that account for multi-way learning and empower end-users to communicate effectively.

Can you tell me a little about yourself?

Harsh's Reflections

My name is Harsh. I'm the co-founder of a social design agency called Alt Unfold, which is based out of New Delhi. I am a queer feminist development professional with over 6 years of experience in programming and advocacy on early childhood development, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and youth leadership building. I co-founded Alt Unfold along with my friend Rhea Chawla who has been my professional partner for almost the entirety of my career thus far.

What was your journey into HCD like?

Harsh's Reflections

After I did my Master's degree, I did a social leadership program called **India Fellow**. It was a fellowship for young Indians who wanted to explore the development space and sort of try to find what's the best fit for them.

When I was doing that program, one of the requirements was to learn something new, like do a course or something. We had a lot of options, and one of the online courses was the **IDEO Human-Centered Design course**. I found it really interesting because the reason why I even entered the development sector was because I love working with people. I love listening to stories. There's so much you can learn just by listening to people talk about their lives. And I am someone who learns personally from everyone I meet. Does not matter what their position is. So I did the Acumen+IDEO course on human centered design. I'm not someone who likes learning in a classroom or an online setting; I'm more of a practical learner. But despite that, I actually found that course quite engaging.

The other component of that fellowship was also a **travel workshop** in Ladakh, which is in the north of India. Even though it was only a week or ten days long, I liked the fact that whatever I had learned in the online course, I actually got to practically implement it.

One of the very important things that sort of caught my attention about the HCD process was the fact that it says that it's okay if the final answer is that you don't need to develop any intervention/product for a particular community. Because of my volunteering experience and discussions with other fellows, I had felt that the development sector sometimes forces interventions on communities and expects them to take ownership of something they don't even believe in. But until and unless the community feels for themselves that okay, this is something that we actually relate to, they won't be able to take ownership of any intervention or program. So I love the fact that HCD was open to me saying, okay, they're good, you can leave, they don't need you here. Just go.

After the fellowship ended, I started working at **The YP Foundation**, which is an organization that works with young people and adolescents on comprehensive sexuality education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and feminist leadership building .

How has HCD changed the way you view things?

Harsh's Reflections

I'll explain that with an example. Let's say I have used HCD to revise a curriculum meant for a specific audience. I can look at the existing curriculum and figure out if a certain case study will work or not. I can analyze and say that an identified activity might not work, because I have a better understanding of potential archetypes of end users, what their (the audience's) learning styles are, and what their attention span is. I can understand what their motivations in life are and the reason they would come to a session. And that if what you're providing through a curriculum is not aligned with their personal motivations, that they won't stay, or they won't engage.

If, for example, you're talking about consent, and you have not broken down what masculinity is, how gender norms affect men as well, how there is a power relationship amongst all individuals - there is a hierarchy amongst men due to other identities as well, etc. Unless you set that base, you can't expect that a once-off session on consent, a black and white definition is simply given, would bring any difference in their attitudes.

When it comes to designing any intervention or products for a program, there'll be 15 people who repeat the same four things that have already been happening in the sector. They want every game to be Snakes and Ladders. But there are other games in the world; there are hundreds of other games that are played locally! You can't expect all adolescents across the country to have the same affinity towards all games and sports.

For example, when we were prototyping for a project, we partnered with an organization called **Project Khel**, based in Lucknow that specializes in using sports based interventions with adolescents and young people. Of the many prototypes we tested, one was a tweaked version of Satolia, a popular local game that we used to try and explain consent because we were aware that it would make it easier to engage adolescents. So basically your brain is brimming with ideas, but you're with 14 other people who will always ask you to make a Snakes and Ladders because that is what worked for other organizations. Or they'll ask you to design a curriculum that has XYZ specific things in it, because they don't want to put in the effort. If you tell them, 'I need to pilot test this activity first, so that I know that this activity works.' You'll get, 'No, no, we don't have that much time.' 'No, no, we don't have that much budget.' So you always end up just sitting there and being like, 'I should have just done my process', which is also one of the reasons why Rhea and I started Alt Unfold.

Can you share an example of an HCD project you've worked on?

Harsh's Reflections

While I was at The YP Foundation, Rhea and I worked on Project Udaan, which was an Indian version of the Adolescents 360 program by PSI. It was a program funded by Children's Investment Fund Foundation and managed by IPE Global Ltd. The YP foundation was a technical partner for one of the strategies where we had to use HCD to design interventions that would help to improve adolescent SRH related knowledge, attitudes, and practices.

My director knew that I had some HCD experience and since HCD was so new in the country, specifically related to SRH programming, I was onboarded onto the program. Udaan was great. It was everything I wanted to do at the beginning of my career. It was the first of its kind, large-scale HCD program in the country on SRHR with young people. I felt that my work life couldn't get better than this!

Project Udaan was about improving adolescent SRH outcomes in Dholpur, Rajasthan - with special focus on strengthening existing RKSK strategies. RKSK is the Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram, or the National Adolescent Health Program, which is specifically aimed at adolescents between the ages of 10 to 19. Due to the uptake of the services in the RKSK program, specifically the SRH services, being lower than expected, we had to look at that program and redesign it or introduce some sort of scalable intervention that would improve the sexual reproductive health and rights information and services for adolescents.

We learnt a lot in that program. We contextualized the Adolescents 360 guide for India, for Rajasthan specifically. The guide included interactive participatory tools for different stakeholders - young girls, older girls, young boys, older boys, mothers, fathers, community influencers, teachers, pharmacists, store owners - everyone we could think of, we conceptualized some sort of a tool for. The idea was to understand the adolescent health ecosystem in its entirety. There are a lot of socio-cultural identities that intersect and determine access to SRHR services, whether it's religion, caste, class, sexuality, gender etc., and therefore it should be expected that every young person would go on a different journey when it comes to accessing information and services and rights. Everyone's experiences are just so diverse. Whether it's based on what sort of family they grew up in, what sort of community they grew up in, what their friends are like, their other identities, their access to education, whether it's affordable or not? What's the topography of the region? How easy is it to reach a health center? How far is the health center? Whether there's a primary health care worker or not? If there is, what are their motivations for working on the program? The journey and experience would differ for each person.

Harsh's Reflections

Towards the end of the formative research, **Quicksand Studios** onboarded onto the project and guided the team through the different phases of the HCD process. Together, the team mapped out the adolescent health ecosystem, the diverse archetypes, journeys, vulnerabilities, and so on. Thereafter we had an ideation workshop where representatives from diverse fields and backgrounds (not necessarily SRH related) through a guided process, brainstormed potential ideas for prototyping.

When we did the ideation workshop, we came up with like 70-80 potential different ideas. This was followed by a feasibility and scalability analysis to shortlist about 10-12 concepts we would be taking on the field. Unfortunately, due to the limitations of integrating an intervention in a state-run program, the project team's brief was revised towards the end of the live prototyping phase. Rhea and I ended up developing an adolescent-centered school-based curriculum that used creative pedagogies to have conversations around key SRH issues and build awareness about the RKSK program.

However, all the learning and insights gained during this process helped us rethink our own individual working styles and approaches and we started integrating more and more HCD related principles and tools into our future work.

What are some challenges you've faced using HCD in development sector projects or in health programs?

Integrating Final solutions in State Programs

Government programs operate within a complex structure. So there is obvious hesitance to try new things and take risks. It is important to be aware of all of the constraints you're operating in if the final goal of your project is to integrate it within a state program. Had we known that earlier in our project, maybe we would have taken a different approach altogether.

Nevertheless, there are a couple of things that may be helpful for designers and programmers working on such projects. One is to involve key government officials from the beginning of a project. Having them onboarded as part of the process and inviting them to all of the crucial stages helps build their ownership and belief in the process and its outcomes. Another important aspect is a rigorous cost-benefit analysis after the ideation stage. How much money per end user would be required from the government to scale a proposed intervention? What definite outcomes can be promised? Would the intervention fall under an existing budget in the implementation plans of the program or will it require additional budgeting? These are important questions, and probably the most important when it comes to scaling up using government systems.

Measuring and Demonstrating Impact

Capturing attitude and behaviour changes in sexual and reproductive health programs can be challenging as some of the takeaways for participants might not be immediately relevant but will be useful tools to navigate critical life situations as and when they occur. Add to that the challenge of convincing people to use an approach that requires that you embrace ambiguity and iterate continuously.

Even if I have told a person about sexuality and related concepts, I can't tell you, 'Oh, within six months, this person used this information in such-and-such a way and hence, the outcome has been met.' It's a lifetime process. A person's sexuality starts from birth. Ends when they die. The way they experience it or express it is different for everyone. So presenting evidence demonstrating the whole range of attitudinal and behavioral changes that may occur as a result of a holistic user-centric approach can get difficult.

What are some of your learnings in using the health + HCD approach?

Harsh's Reflections

HCD is a Mindset

The term HCD may be new, but the basic principle behind it is what black civil-rights movements, women's rights movements, queer-rights movements, indigenous people's movements have been saying for decades now - *'put us at the table, put us in the center.'* Activists ask why cis-men are making decisions about, say contraception and abortion, for example. Why is there no other gender in the room? Or why is only a certain caste, class, or race being included in the decision-making processes? That's what these movements are saying, right? *'Put us at the center, because it's for us.'* So, it's not something new. There are certain tools and tricks that are different, but at the end of the day, it's about centering people and co-creating solutions with them based on their needs and aspirations.

The Importance of Mental Health Safeguards

I used to have this sort of discussion with my superiors where they would always tell me, 'Harsh you are too friendly with the people that you work with.' Because I used to get calls even as late as midnight. There were young people in the community who would call me at 1 a.m. because they'd had a break-up, 'I've just broken up with my girlfriend or boyfriend, what should I do?' And I'm someone who will pick up the call at 1am because I'm usually awake, and also I just didn't like not taking calls when someone called because it was the pandemic, right, and the number of requests for, for example, abortion services, people facing violence at home, were a lot. So I always used to give out my number, which I realized afterward was not good for my own mental health, then I had to sort of take a step back and define my own professional boundaries. This is why one of the very important considerations whenever you're working with adolescents and young people, specifically on SRH, is that you need to have **very strong mental health** and other services referrals in place. In case someone is facing violence, or someone needs legal assistance, you need to have that local referral system in place, before you send your designers, your researchers into their community, because every conversation during research, or a session or during prototyping may have the potential to trigger some unhappy or uncomfortable memory. In some cases even the design researcher themselves might need some sort of assistance from a mental health professional, given the sensitivity of the issues that are often discussed. So it's very important to have that in place.

Having a couple of mental health professionals to turn to is very, very important because we know that most if not all people in the country are living with a host of complex intergenerational traumas. I know, there are problems with the mental health space as well, and we therefore also need to look to community-centered support initiatives. Mental health professionals are out of reach financially for many people in the country. Therefore, there's a necessity to overhaul this sector but it may be necessary to establish a system on the project to enable those in need to easily access the appropriate assistance. This is essential because it's unrealistic to expect your researcher or facilitator to address all these issues. You can be trauma informed in your work - there are specific things that you can keep in mind while facilitating conversations to avoid retraumatization. These are the things you should be careful of, and I think not enough people do it, unfortunately.

In order to strengthen HCD in youth-focused programs, what are the top 2 things that we should work towards?

Harsh's Reflections

Truly passing the mic

One thing is just **including more young people who are not from traditional backgrounds**. We keep talking about passing the mic, but we never really do pass the mic. I feel like I see the same sort of people in these spaces, people who are from a certain school, comfortable with a certain language, with a certain mindset. While designing programs, reach out to the young people who've never been asked for their opinion. Do not judge someone from the first interaction, like, 'oh, this won't make for a good participant because they didn't speak much,' because that's simply not true. It's not like they're not speaking because they can't think out of the box. They're not speaking because they're not used to speaking.

When we used to facilitate co-creation workshops, there were times when women would come up to us and they'd be like, *'we have never uttered a word in our life, no one has ever asked us for our opinion, ever. We understand what you're trying to know. But this is actually the first time someone has come up to me and asked me, 'what do you think?' And I'm struggling with that because no one ever asked me to think in this way so don't feel bad that I'm not speaking. It's just that we have never spoken. We don't know how to communicate our opinion accurately. So for us, it's a very new experience that someone has come from outside, who is asking us, 'What do you think about your lives? What do you think should be done?'* So for them to cross that threshold is a very difficult thing, right? So you need to have multiple interactions.

So creating that space for diverse people from different backgrounds - finding people who are connected to the ground more than finding people who are connected to the process. You can have one person who's familiar with the process, who can guide the rest, but it's important to have as many diverse people and experiences in the room as possible.

You learn as a person, you learn as a designer, when you interact with people. This, I know. There are always time constraints, and I only need to talk to 30 people or whatever. But it's okay to do 40. Sometimes it's okay to find that one extra hour or two extra hours, if feasible, to engage with people that have never been engaged with.

Harsh's Reflections

More participatory and flexible funding patterns

The other thing is, just sensitizing more funding organizations or donor organizations towards having more participatory and flexible funding patterns. Talking to them about how there's a need to re-evaluate the way funding is considered, the way donations are considered - the need to reimagine what their theory of change framework looks like in the first place. If you want to build a community, stop being stuck to a specific theme. If you work towards building a community, you will see an improvement in SRH, you'll see an improvement in the way they treat the environment.

So for example, instead of having a project that will just improve SRH, one might start a project that will build the capacity of the people from that community to lead and tackle problems they observe in their own communities. Perhaps donors and funders can think more about developing HCD practitioners within the community, so that it's less about, 'Oh, I wanted to give them contraceptive access,' and more about, 'Oh, I wanted to help them solve their own problems, whatever they are.' So we need to encourage them to be less thematically obsessed, and to focus more on building the competencies within the community in order to carry this process forward.

That seems more sustainable. Building five young people in the community who think that way will always be more useful than just one program centered on a public health outcome. Right? Looking at how we can build capacities for people to take up HCD is very important. And young people are enthusiastic about these things because the process of HCD is very fun and engaging.

What advice would you give to designers who are getting started in the development space?

Harsh's Reflections

I've seen designers just go in and ask direct questions. And I'm like, no, that is not how you do it. This is based on personal experiences of working with people from a design school, who have not worked with the community as much. We sometimes have a tendency to look for things. I don't know how to phrase it, but you could call it confirmation bias? If you ask someone a question, don't just take your participant's response at face value and write it down as an insight. Young/new design researchers are prone to making that mistake quite often.

Without a deeper connection to the community, a brief one-hour interaction won't reveal the intricacies of their lives. People tend to share what they think you want to hear, making it crucial to gain a more profound understanding of the context.

Five day sprints will not give you that depth of context. You need to include people from that community in your design teams. The local people who can tell you, okay, the woman might have said that she doesn't like using contraceptives because of certain medical reasons, but there are other underlying factors at play. It may be a religious or cultural belief in that community where it's considered bad for a woman to use contraceptives. But they may not tell you this, because you're an outsider, and they'll feel like you will judge them. So it's very important for any design team to have local people to validate all insights.

We did that during the Project Udaan. We had locals who were part of the design team to observe our conversations. Then they used to look at the documented insights and help fill in the gaps. HCD requires you to be comfortable with saying "I don't know", which is another really fun thing about HCD - to accept and admit that there are things you don't know - which a lot of "experts" often have difficulty understanding.

HCD requires you to have a learner's mindset

HCD requires you to be a learner. Less of an expert, or a preacher, or a trainer, and more of a listener and learner. People sometimes stop learning once they leave their universities. They feel like, 'Oh, I've been learning for 25 years of my life, now it's time to execute and implement.' But really, it's not time to just execute and implement. It's still time to listen and learn. Unless you learn, you will not be able to help anyone. So it's about having the ability to let go, because for HCD, at the end of the day, you need humility, you need empathy. If you don't have these two things, you can have all the degrees in the world; it won't help you. If you can't come down from your pedestal, the person sitting in front of you will not engage. Someone who can observe that you believe they're beneath you will not engage with you in an honest conversation. So that relationship building is very important.

Harsh's Reflections

Direct questions are not your best bet
You also need to avoid direct questions. I'm not talking about open-ended questions and yes or no questions. I'm saying, if you want to learn about their sexual life or similar, you don't need to go and be like tell me about your sex life. There are multiple different ways to approach talking about SRH that may or may not be directly linked to SRH.

When I first heard someone ask a participant, 'when did you first start having sex?' I was shocked. Because for a lot of young people, their first sexual experience could have been a violent/non-consensual encounter. It's just the sad reality of the country that we live in. Unless you understand what **trauma-informed approaches** are, you wouldn't know that this is not a question to ask a young person (or any person for that matter). Because for them, it might trigger memories of abuse. So you need to be very mindful of how you are talking about sexual and reproductive health.

Stop over complicating simple things.
Stop introducing jargon where it's not necessary. It disconnects you from the audience very quickly. If you see someone from the grassroots interacting with an HCD practitioner who is relatively new to the development space, it's very interesting. Because we've observed that sometimes the HCD person will throw out some terms and the grassroots person will be like, 'Wow, that sounds complex. What is it?' And once you explain, you'll find that the grassroots organization has been doing something similar for the past decade, they just call it something different.

So there's a disconnect between the traditional design space, or the formal design space, and the development space. People need to interact more, and really meet participants at a basic level. The basic design principle I often see when people start an assignment is that it needs to be easy-to-understand. Maybe we need to implement it on ourselves first, and then do it in the program.

Why did you start Alt+Unfold?

Harsh's Reflections

Rhea and I have always envisioned Alt Unfold to be a workspace for young professionals to collaborate and design alternative approaches when programming for social change. We wanted to center stories and narratives from communities that are often de-prioritised owing to the rigid frameworks of developmental planning and design.

As Alt Unfold, how do you deal with some of the challenges that you were facing being in an NGO?

Harsh's Reflections

At Alt Unfold, due to the freedom of not being an NGO, we can talk like we have more agency, more power to negotiate compared to being in a NGO-funder situation because now it's a client relationship. So we are in a good position to negotiate the terms, timelines and deliverables that we can commit to as an agency, as opposed to an NGO where you have a full-time staff contingent to answer to, so you have certain limitations. In an NGO, you need money to pay your staff at the end of the day, so you may end up compromising on certain ethics and values. I think now as Alt Unfold, we are able to hold on to our values better, because we have the power to say no.

Rhea and I have very strict values that we don't want to compromise on. Whether it's how we talk about sex, whether it's how we talk about gender, whether it's how we talk about caste, disability, sexuality, we don't want to compromise on anyone's rights, which is weird for a for-profit organization to say (haha!). But for us, we **needed some financial freedom in order to have enough money to self-fund some of our passion projects that would not have found funding from donor agencies in the development space.**

This structure also allows us to work with a diverse group of people who have different expertise than we do. So there are opportunities to learn not just from the assignment but within the team as well!

What do you envision for the future of Alt Unfold?

Harsh's Reflections

We want to design more interactive, inclusive events or spaces. You can't just have the development sector work with poor marginalized communities. Of course, that's important, but at the same time, talk to the people who have the money, talk to the people who are in positions of power, teach caste to upper caste people. The lower caste has experienced enough trauma, why only focus on telling them that their rights are violated? Teach caste to the privileged upper class people and make them realize that they need to change this system, right?

In this way, we want to slowly move into working with more private institutions, working with more urban audiences, working with people who the development sector might not necessarily target because they are not the key target beneficiaries of any program.

We also want to create products that simplify rights-based language and concepts for the general population. You will find a lot of people online arguing about feminism, because they don't understand what it actually means. And no one is going to make them understand it. No one is talking to these people who have a problem with, 'oh, why is everyone so woke?' But I think unless you have a conversation, unless you break these concepts down to the simplest level, and have people relate it to their own lived experiences, they will never understand it. It's just that sometimes people have only heard bits-and-pieces so there is a divide even before starting a conversation.
If you're thinking of becoming a parent, and you have a queer kid, you need to understand how to raise a child who's queer, because that's important, right? Not just in rural areas, or rural communities, everyone, all parents need to learn that. So we want to explore that side of products and games as well as the events and interactive spaces - to bridge that gap

How do you go about convincing people to use HCD?

Harsh's Reflections

I think the convincing usually actually happens afterwards, from experience, right? You just need to find someone who is willing to say, 'Okay, let's try.' They might not want to advocate for HCD, they might not be HCD champions before it starts. It's during the process that a person actually realizes that HCD is in fact a useful and effective process.

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