

Courtney Martin:

Hi, Welcome to Solvers. I'm Courtney Martin

Nguhi Mwaura:

And I'm Nguhi Mwaura. On this podcast, you'll hear about how social innovators are tackling the world's biggest problems to build a better future. Solvers is a show where Courtney and I have conversations with people who are dealing with problems that are not just big, but complex.

Courtney Martin:

And today's guest is a prime example of that complexity. His name is Harish Hande and he's the CEO of Selco.

Nguhi Mwaura:

We're going to hear your conversation with Hareesh in a moment, but Courtney, what would you say Harish is actually solving for?

Courtney Martin:

Oh man. I mean, Selco's work is really hard to sum up because it's kind of like what Adrian Marie Brown calls emergent, right? It's shape-shifting and sort of responsive to the people it empowers. But in essence, they're tackling both the energy crisis and poverty by equipping an unlikely entrepreneur. Not Harvard trained social entrepreneurs, but street vendors. So anyway, here's my conversation with Harish Hande.

Courtney Martin:

In watching a lot of the talks that you've given, you often begin by talking about street vendors, they're sort of central to your work central, to your theory of change. Can you start by telling us the story of one particular street vendor that has taught you something or been sort of meaningful in a way that you think about when you're thinking about the change you're making in the world?

Harish Hande:

For me, the street vendors represent the whole concept of social enterprises, development, inclusivity, right at the doorstep. They sell vegetables to the poor at the most affordable price. So for me, it's democracy in the best form. And I think some of the lessons that I have learned from street vendors is about resilience, about adaptability, and being flexible. So for example, a tomato street vendor suddenly, one day, just because tomato prices go up, she cannot come and say I'm a tomato expert. So I cannot sell anything else. If she says that her three kids will starve. She diversifies and sells potatoes.

Harish Hande:

But unfortunately in our world, as we get more educated, we become less useful for the world. I think one of the best lessons from a street vendor and especially in our field, when we were doing solar, when she truly taught me what cashflow meant, she said, "300 rupees a month is expensive, but 10 rupees a day is fine." Basically taught us, taught me to look at financials in a very different way because our cashflow was on a daily basis. So, what is expensive? What is affordability? It all depends on the ecosystem and that's why street vendors have taught me so much. Yeah.

Courtney Martin:

Do you remember-- Did you grow up with street vendors around, what was your first experience of one? Did you always have a sense that there was wisdom there? Or do you remember how you were taught to think about them?

Harish Hande:

Actually, I didn't grow up here, though, I was born and brought up in one of the poorest parts of the country, in Odisha. But there, I mean Odisha, at that point of time, even now, is one of the poorest states. There, I surely felt in terms of the non-inclusivity of society. There was always a difference between me and they. I think, and renders were very common in terms of business values, right. From where I was born, to where I studied, back to the U.S., and if you go to New York, down, back to Bangalore where I'm here, those commonalities of, of that non-inclusive nature. And when they were the fabric of society, but they were never part of the growth of society in many ways.

Courtney Martin:

Yeah. And I mean, do you remember asking you about that as a kid or anything, because that's one of the great gifts of children's innocence and sort of naivete, right? Is that they ask these fundamental questions. I'm kind of imagining like a little, Harish trying to make sense of the world.

Harish Hande:

Not for street vendors, but definitely in Odisha because a lot of us were immigrants. Odisha was a poor state, it was trying to build a steel factory and we were from different parts of the country. While the original population was very poor tribals, who were always used as physical labor. And so the whole point was that they never were part of the steel factory, but they were only part of cleaning results, cleaning houses, gardening. And that was always mysterious in a sense that the people who spoke the language, the people who are actually part of that state, were never part of the true economy in many ways.

Harish Hande:

So you ask questions, "How come those kids never go to the same school?" I used to go to my grandparents' house where untouchability was a norm and where a lot of the other family members would, not allow me to touch a certain type of people. And if you touch them, you actually have to take a bath. So I would never figure out why I used to take eight to nine times a bath on a daily basis. And this was in your own lifetime. You're talking about, I mean, defer that you could not touch people.

Courtney Martin:

Wow. That is a profound physical training. You know, like I'm imagining the way in which that gets inside of your psyche and your body. How have you untrained yourself around some of the "us versus them", you know, culture that you were raised with, because it seems like you're able to see the wisdom and expertise in the street vendors in a way that I would just assume, you know, you'd have to really untrain your own mind a bit, given what you experienced.

Harish Hande:

I'm glad I was born and brought up in a city that made you liberal in one way or the other. But again, I mean, then you go and then you look at racism, then you question what racism means. And that's why I

keep, I mean, we keep joking that we Indians are our classic paradox and hypocrites because we are in the middle. We complain about racism, but we are racist to skin that is darker than us. So all humanity gets lots and it's all related. And when you talk about racism, white or blue or black, and I think-- and then religions, Muslim, and it's all depends on if my name was X and suddenly my name became Y the people perception would change just because my last name would be very different. So you're always judged by your last name, which is just kind of crazy.

Courtney Martin:

Absolutely. That's fascinating. Can you take us into your model a little bit, and the ways in which street vendors are sort of the start of how you think about making change? I mean, bring us into this on a really nuts and bolts level, explain how it works.

Harish Hande:

In a very crass way. I would say yes, we work in the field of sustainable energy and how can sustainable energy be used as a catalyst to democratize the health, education, and livelihoods, because we all live in a non-inclusive world. How do we create a platform of inclusiveness for the poor to show off their talent? Whether they can be a philosopher, whether they'll be inventor or innovator today, it's not a non-playing field because of centralized systems of ecosystem, like central everything is a lot of central power, subsidies, electricity, everything is centralized. And that's why, how do you democratize? And we believe that sustainable energy is kind of a platform to democratize that.

Harish Hande:

So unfortunately, the company, we are known for solar or de-centralized renewable energy for us is the truth is that priority they can only be eradicated if the thinking became inclusive. Today, the thinking is non-inclusive.

Harish Hande:

So it's like maid, servants kid, has to be our kid's maid, servant. Or a street vendor who is selling a tomato or a potato might be for 45 years. And if I did a PhD on street vending, I will be called an expert who will go and teach her how to do it while she has been doing it for 40 years. That divide that "I'm an expert," same thing in agriculture, right? All the experts of agriculture have never done agriculture themselves, but they are going to teach the poor or the farmers how to do agriculture.

Harish Hande:

So this question of qualification and education qualification, where does it fit in, in terms of hierarchy? Just because somebody graduates from a certain college or institute, whether it's an Indian Institutes of Technology or Stanford. So we base a person-- So on their LinkedIn profile, we've not even seen, but we have checked, "Oh, he's super smart," because he went to Stanford, or IIT, while the 600 million poor people in India, or 2 billion people, four people, in the world can never be called smart. Even if they do something brilliant, we romanticize them and say, "See how we did it."

Harish Hande:

I mean, why is that? That's the model that we say that, how do we break those myths using sustainable energy as a catalyst? And that's what we do, or create ecosystems where poor become asset owners

and hopefully create a level playing field where the poor are able to see the dream or the future that they would like to, the sense of ownership. Yes.

Courtney Martin:

Yeah. I'm sort of drawing a line between this notion of the untouchables that you encountered as a kid. And now these people are sort of the untrustables. You know, what do we think about credibility or even the unfind-ables? Like you're sort of slashing through all these misperceptions about who we are based on our last name. You know, whether we went to Stanford or Harvard, it's just like another last name, basically, right? It's another thing we slap on someone based on the luck of their birth. In really practical terms, if a street vendor wants to get involved with the work you guys are doing, do they approach you or do you approach them? I mean, bring us into the work on a very gritty daily level.

Harish Hande:

Though we work with a different set of client base, in a sense, whether it's a street vendor at a blacksmith blower or a vegetable vendor or a silk weaver or a roti rolling machine maker, different segments of client base that we work with. But currently the issue for us is many of my colleagues, 90% of my colleagues come from the client base. For us, the actual test of joining a Selco is the moment an auto rickshaw driver calls you, sir, that means you are at a much lower level than him or her. How do you reach out to that level? When a rickshaw driver, a farmer, or a street vendor actually feels that you're one of them where, where the trustworthy, should be so much that at one o'clock in the night, he or she is able to call you that "I have a problem."

Harish Hande:

The challenge for us is how do you create an equal platform where a street vendor or a blacksmith blower or a silk weaver actually treats you as a partner, you have a certain expertise. They have a certain expertise. Together, are we coming up with a solution that's actually for common good for everybody. That's where we look. A lot of my colleagues come from that. We've been, we broke those boundaries by not taking resumes at all. Where we, lot of the people who have grown up in the organization, I have no idea what their education qualification is, what language background, et cetera, et cetera. And we have also disoriented the salary structures based on how useful you have been for the society. Not how useful are you for the organization. For us, first form is the, is society. Second is the ecosystem that is a sector of energy and sustainability. Third is Selco.

Courtney Martin:

I am so curious since you don't use resumes and you said you don't even know what educational level a person has attained. How do you hire when someone comes into your office, what kind of conversations do you have? What do you look for to know if they're going to be able to have the sort of character that they need to do this work?

Harish Hande:

It's a hit and miss some [inaudible 00:11:45]. We have a set of people in the organization who do the first set of interviews. The first thing they do is they interview and they come out and say, yes, let's do the second. He or she is a Selco-type. So don't tell me how, I have no idea what definition of a Selco-type is. Somebody, the basic is, does he or she have the passion and common sense and then passion, not romanticism because romance will die. It's a passion that will continue to get people up and doing so, I mean, we basically say you will get frustrated. We never know what our holidays are. And we say that

we work on Saturdays and we'll get Saturday holiday only if the poor gets Sunday holidays. So are you ready for it one way or the other? And we basically say that, and we take the hard questions saying that it's going to be tough. It's going to be half the people are very frustrated all the time because we are not able to solve poverty. So these are questions a lot of my colleagues will ask, and basically discourage them from joining the organization. And see, if somebody presents a no it's what it is. So we say, either people stay in the organization for three months and leave, or they stay for 10, 15, 12, 18 years.

Courtney Martin:

Well, I could talk about that all day, but I do want to hear you talk a little bit about COVID specifically in this moment we're experiencing around the pandemic, because I know that shifted your work and all kinds of interesting ways. So talk a little bit about, the pandemic, how it's changed your work, how it's changed your mindset. These days

Harish Hande:

COVID-19 clarified and actually justified the whole ecosystem approach of Selco. COVID-19 frankly speaking is a trailer to a much larger crisis, like climate change. And both, in both cases, the biggest brunt is always faced by the poor, whether it was with a lot of the migrants who had to go back or the people who suffer because of droughts and floods and everything that the climate change has actually on it. Right? So, for us, COVID-19 in, the first 15, 20 days, kind of was a unknown territory. But after that, we said, no, this is the moment for us to work. There is going to be no vacations. And my other colleagues basically said, one promise that we all took and nobody will be let go, let's see the resilience of an organization like ours. Because our centralized systems had failed, curtly, the supply chain had failed, the whole question of centralized power and everything. So, this is where for us to prove that sustainable energy could be the right catalyst.

Courtney Martin:

So, in many ways, this COVID-19 moment has actually affirmed that your organization was structured in a way that is sustainable, as opposed to putting, you know, all of our trust in these top down institutions that claim they're going to scale these huge solutions and then sort of fail in these moments. Right?

Harish Hande:

Right. When a lot of the people went back and a lot of people who could not sell their products or produce in the rural areas, because the centralized supply chains had collapsed, it many of them to democratize the, okay-- What are the local markets? What are the local solutions? How do we actually create systems that would economically, socially sustain in the local areas, in a platter, it was given to you about how do you think of sustainability in the best form of consumption local production without actually having to push for all those and an ecosystem approach. So, perfect. Yes, lot of sufferings have happened. Hopefully we learn about decentralization and democratization. We will not get another chance for the next crisis. That is the climate.

Courtney Martin:

Can you say a little bit about scale? Because as you know, in this kind of social entrepreneurship world, it's such an obsession and there's so many funders, both in the nonprofit and even on the investors side, who talk about it all the time, how do you think about scale?

Harish Hande:

There are two aspects. One is needs. And one is wants. I want is like, I want an iPad, or I want something that is luxurious. Those are standardized. And that those scale. The needs are: my lighting is very different to your lighting, I need clean water, my livelihood applications, my cashflows, those are very customized to individual. Like your lighting is very different to your neighbor's lighting. So the question is, the needs have to be customized to what needs to scale is processes and not the organizations themselves.

Harish Hande:

And as very clearly, COVID-19 has gone. Many of the organizations which have ramped up with a so-called gold at the end of the rainbow have actually collapsed during COVID-19 spoiling the enormous number of philanthropic money that had gone into these organizations. Had we actually distributed those philanthropic money to, for creating the ecosystem? Many small enterprises still have good, I mean that ultimately, the end user would not have suffered as he or she is suffering today. It's like the analogy that we always have between the Google and the internet in a sense that Google would not have succeeded if somebody else had not paid for the internet and internet is an ecosystem, which needs to be commonly subsidized. It's a common goal. So for me, the concept, again, going back to street vending the concept of street vending has scale up. One street vendor does badly, it does not affect the neighboring street vendor, but, look at the scale. Let's kill the process and democratize and be centralized enterprises.

Courtney Martin:

Right. And that also distributes the risk to your point, right? The risk is spread out further. So you keep more people safer.

Harish Hande:

And distributes wealth and, and creates inclusivity and lesser disparities.

Courtney Martin:

Okay. So when you go to bed tonight and you're lying there in the dark, what are you worrying about? What's on your mind most these days as just the thing that you are hoping you and your colleagues can still work towards.

Harish Hande:

What happens is even after 25 years of work, right? You always think that yes, you've seen it, but it's always something that happens in the week. I mean, where did this come from? Why didn't we know about this challenge before? Like simple things, even the slum dwellers, right? I mean, you've got a call that the COVID-- half of them went away back to their villages and some of the other private sector estate dealers took the advantage and took the land so that they could never come back. Right? So, how do you deal with that? So when they come back, what happens to their possessions? Right? Coming back to [inaudible 00:18:22], what do you worry? I mean, you don't worry.

Harish Hande:

My mind as of now, is how do you incorporate the thinking of ecosystem into many of the youngsters saying that you're not an expert at one thing, guys. I don't care whether you're a mechanical engineer or MBA finance, end of the day, you are just a solution provider. That's all. Go to the rural area. Don't tell

me I'm an electrical engineer, I cannot solve it. A tomato vendor does not tell me that I'm a tomato expert. What she can sell anything. So you end of the day, how do you break? And for me, the worrying part got me is that our education system is so rigid. Right? So rigid in a manner that kills innovation, that kills thinking. How do you make that to happen? And that's been our biggest challenge, always.

Courtney Martin:

Okay. So less expertise, less ego, more just having a solver mentality, kind of, how do you solve problems? You know, vertical plane, not in some hierarchy of human value.

Harish Hande:

Yeah, exactly. And I have a PhD, I said, yes, boss, you had five years to actually waste. A lot of the [inaudible 00:19:25] didn't have five years to waste. You had the luxury of doing a PhD that many of the poor don't have the luxury. And that's exactly why they don't have. So it's a very exclusive degree you got because you had the luxury to do it. So this, this whole concept of where you come from, how do you bring it to a lot of youngsters saying that yes, the ego of where you are, who you are, and why you are in what place. That you ultimately the end goal is, was, are you eradicating poverty in the most sustainable manner?

Courtney Martin:

I was so struck, Arundhati Roy had this piece in the financial times about the pandemic that was really beautiful. I don't know if you read it, but it ended with this paragraph. She wrote, "Historically pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred or avarice or data banks and debt ideas, or dead rivers and smokey skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly with little luggage, ready to imagine another world and ready to fight for it. It seems like as I'm listening to you, that you embody so much of this paragraph. Does that paragraph speak to you? And if so, what does it say?"

Harish Hande:

Absolutely. Yeah. So I mean, when, when a lot of things that, Oh, let's wait for the pandemic to end. The question is what do you mean to end? Don't you think it's a new form to actually relook at, reestablish ecosystems. And it's a high, good time to purge things that have gone wrong. And I think that's the mistake a lot of people did of working from home and saying that I'm working from home, and so I'm going to wait for something to happen while you could have actually made a new system saying that let's use this opportunity to do that. And I think, and that's where Courtney, in a country like ours, I found a stark difference between the educated elite and the common, that the educated elite, which was working from home actually had no solutions in a crisis like this.

Courtney Martin:

Okay. I want to bring you back to your childhood a bit, that little boy looking around, sort of wondering why do the people who actually have the expertise here not get to benefit from the wealth that's being built. Do you remember at that time, anything that anyone said to you or a poem or song or anything that sort of stuck with you and influence the way you do your work

Harish Hande:

Gandhi was very influential. I mean, the whole thing that "be the change you want to see". I think for me, it's like come from a society that Courtney, where a girl comes back home gets, 96 out of a hundred in mathematics. The first question the parents ask is where did you lose your four marks? And it's not about celebrating what is 96 or celebrating what you are. So everybody's boxed into a certain thinking process that you had to-- the herd mentality as we call it nation education system. And we slowly become complainers, right. In a sense, this doesn't happen. That does not happen. The comment has to do this. So Mahatma Gandhi was very much a highly influential in terms of "be the change you want to see" is very, very influential. If you see a problem, are you able to think of five solutions rather than thinking who else is going to solve it, but that's the only way to get rid of poverty.

Courtney Martin:

Harish, are you a parent?

Harish Hande:

Yes. I have two kids. Yes.

Courtney Martin:

How do, how does this inform your parenting? Do you ask your kids things like, "All right, you're complaining, what are five solutions for it?" I just, I can imagine you having a really unique way of engaging your kids to learn, to be this way.

Harish Hande:

Yeah. I mean, I'm, I'm glad my daughter goes that way. I asked my wife many, many years ago saying that I'm going to experiment with this kid when she was six months old and started to travel with her alone. So now that she's 17, basically. Yes. On one side, super liberal, but also about, about solutions and about right from, for her STEM classes, making baby warmers for disaster areas to do drip irrigation using [inaudible 00:23:34] water. So, very much about equality, but that's not because he's my kid. It's the multiple visits that, when she was one year old, one and a half years old, two years, to many of the areas and solution that consistent travel actually led to that.

Harish Hande:

I think people have to give exposure to the kids about, it's not about romanticizing. Oh, we want our kids to see what others don't have. I mean, no, I mean, that's such a sad way of looking at problems, right? It's about how do you look at equality and save us. Everybody has expertise in the world. What can you learn from that X person? Whether it is a street vendor, a beggar, a person working in the brothels of Amsterdam, to anybody else. So expose her to everything. Everybody has a certain expertise. You cannot judge either by what they do, or what their last name is, or what their religion is. It's about everybody in this world has that strength. Hopefully, as somebody had told us, don't follow your father, but start from where he leaves.

Courtney Martin:

I love that. That's so beautiful. Well, thank you so much for this conversation. I'm so honored to talk to you and truly learn from you. And I will carry it with me. Thanks Harish.

Harish Hande:

Thanks Courtney for doing this.

Courtney Martin:

So that was my conversation with Hareesh. I was just so struck by so many things about his way of seeing the world and seeing his team and the way he thinks about making social change. But I think in particular, I was, I was touched by that end piece about his daughter. I think one conversation we have in social change circles is there are a lot of people who are trying to make change in all these big ways but sometimes we lose sight of the humans, right in front of us who live in our homes and the hard work of parenting and partnering. And it was just really sweet to hear him end on that note and the pride in his voice. What did you think about it?

Nguhi Mwaura:

I just thought that, wow, what a varied conversation you guys had, I think from the global nature of anti-blackness to thinking about what does it mean to actually be educated and whose expertise do we value in this world, but also, you know, what, what is expertise? And, and if each of us have it, what are we losing by excluding some people's expertise because of where we perceive they sit in society. So, what an incredible conversation, I was really challenged about thinking about how the more educated you are, the less useful you are. So yeah.

Courtney Martin:

(laughs) I know bad news for us, right.

Nguhi Mwaura:

It's not standing well, but you know, what does that mean for future generations? Is Zoom school it? Is apprenticeship who knows, who knows?

Courtney Martin:

I have to admit I've actually stopped saving for my kids' college education because I am almost like cynical about (a) whether the future of college is even going to look like it does now in 15 years. But also like what? I even want her to go if it does. I just feel like he's, he touches on the ways in which education does not develop humanity, but so many other things sometimes do. Not that education can't develop humanity, but particularly the sort of elite version that he's speaking out against, which I think is so powerful. So anyway, it's food for thought. Maybe my daughter will be pissed. (laughs) We'll see.

Nguhi Mwaura:

Well, we'll have to check in 15 years from now and say, [crosstalk 00:27:25] let's take this back.

Courtney Martin:

That's it for this episode of Solvers, you can subscribe to the show on Apple podcasts, Spotify, Google podcasts, or wherever you're listening to this.

Nguhi Mwaura:

And if you like what you heard, please rate and review us and share this episode with someone you think would love to hear Harish's story too. See you next week.

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Courtney Martin:

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Courtney Martin:

Our theme music is by Wonderly. And we'd love to hear what you thought about the episode. So email at solvers@skoll.org.

Nguhi Mwaura:

Or tweet us [@skollfoundation](#) #solverspod, or me, Courtney, [@courtwrites](#). We would just love to hear what you think. See you next week.