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Why public policy deserves to be made with different 'Fields of View'

Fields of View designs games and simulations to make better policy and these games are played by a range of people from sanitary workers, truck drivers, public policy masters students to IAS officers



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Edex Live





A game in session

The day that two gamers and one engineer-turned journalist decided that they could use games to bridge the gap between the government and the people, the world of policy-making didn't just get a whole lot more interesting — It made it an equal playground and it got the softest and the loudest voice, all on the same level. Bangalore-based **Fields of View** has, for the last eight years, designed games and simulations to make better policy. As strange as the idea sounds, it has brought together government officials, IAS officers, sanitation workers, factory workers and civil society groups.

Sruthi Krishnan, Bharath M Palavalli and Harsha Krishna founded Fields of View in 2012. “I had been writing about tech in India and I soon realised that a lot of the tech here is ‘paratrooped’ from the West. But this technology fails here because it was developed elsewhere because there is no understanding of the Indian context and social aspect,” Sruthi said. And then she met Bharath and Harsha, technology researchers, who were avid gamers and also played professionally, “The idea that games could be used to address social problems was very intriguing. It is important for people to

participate in public policy making and if there no meaningful participation, the policy eventually doesn't make any sense. We need to understand people's needs and preferences and use it for a better future. But how? There was no systemic way of collecting data. So that's when we decided to be tool builders," Sruthi said.



The trio thought they would join somebody who was already doing what they wanted to do but unfortunately, or fortunately, they didn't find anybody. So they decided to do it themselves. "We had a hypothesis but we needed to create tools and design it for the Indian context to see if this was something that could actually be done," she said. "Our work involves undertaking research at the intersection of social science, technology and art. A collaboration of the government, academia and civil society,"

the team says.

For example, Sruthi explains how public transport works in our country, “The transport models and methods developed elsewhere are brought here. They see planning as a physical system, a collection of roads, fleet, buses and they try to see how efficient it is, how travel time, fares and fuel usage can be reduced. But, they do not see planning as contextual, with people at the heart of the process.” She goes on elaborate by describing how garment factory workers in Bangalore, mostly women use public transport to travel to work. “But most of the women are forced to take private transport, because the bus routes aren’t accessible to them. Public transport is safer for women and yet they are unable to access it. Here is where we recognise that everyone’s needs and preferences need to be taken into consideration when planning is done. Through games and simulations, along with efficiency, we can consider people’s needs and plan for multiple options, their trade-offs and consequences,” she explained.



Games help the team create a dialogue between diverse

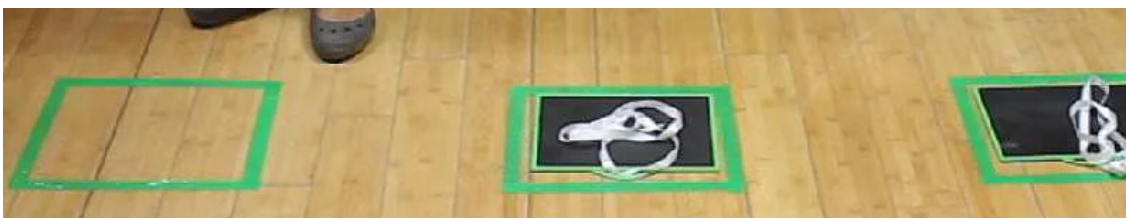
Games help the team create a dialogue between diverse stakeholders and simulations lets the stakeholders imagine and explore multiple futures. A simulation is an approximate imitation of the operation of a process or system that represents its operation over time, so here, Fields of View use these simulations to present different options to the stakeholders. One of their games, 'Transport Trilemma' designed for urban planning, lets the players act as transport planners. The team uses data from the BMTC for the game and brings in different needs of people, the garment hubs, routes and other such aspects and the players have to come with a plan for the different options. "The players can see the exact model of the world and because all the information is based on real data, it is easy to understand and play. For actual policy makers, these games allow them a chance to fail. As a culture we are taught not to fail but that's where the learning lay. The game is a safe environment to fail," she pointed out.



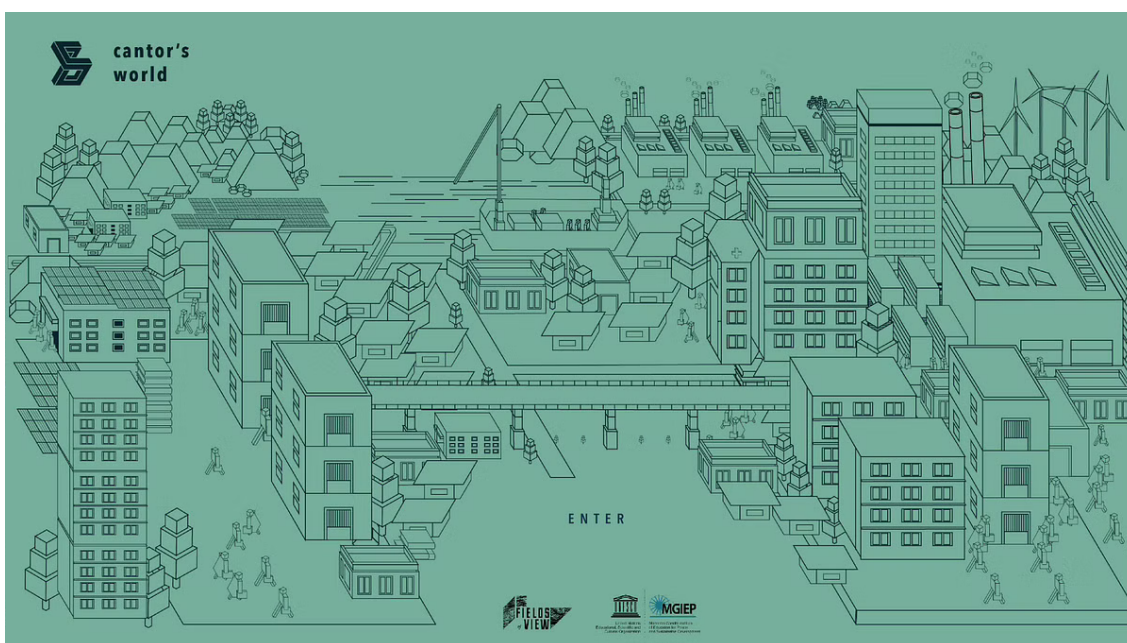
Sruthi interacting with participants

In these games, there are no right answers. “There’s no point if people just try to play smart by figuring out what will give them more points. The whole purpose is lost. Ours is a model of the real world so there are no right answers,” Sruthi tells us. Another interesting game, that the team has come up with involved waste management in the cities, “We created a board game where different wards in the city have to collect dry waste. Whenever the waste doesn’t get collected, the landfill gets filled up. On the one hand, the player has to make a profit, but if they forget about the garbage, the landfill fills up, so that demands that all the players have to cooperate and work together.”





The Fields of View is a firm believer in the 73rd and 74th Amendment — The 73rd and the 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, 1992 enjoin upon the states to establish a three-tier system of Panchayats at the village, intermediate and district levels and Municipalities in the urban areas respectively. States are expected to devolve adequate powers, responsibilities and finances upon these bodies so as to enable them to prepare plans and implement schemes for economic development and social justice. “In the villages there is more participation but in the cities we barely see any involvement. We need local level plans in urban areas, have dialogues with urban local bodies. Ward committees are only just starting in Bangalore, Chennai doesn't have any yet. Citizens and civil societies have to actively work to implement the 74th amendment,” Sruthi feels.



These games have been played by sanitary workers, truck drivers, public policy masters students, IAS officers, government officials, “One session, we had IAS officers who walked in dressed up all neatly in their coats and they didn’t seem to care that much about the game. They were quite distant but by the end of it, the officers had all removed their coats, rolled up their sleeves and were completely into the game. Since the numbers are actual data, they are numbers they anyway play with day to day, so they get very involved in the game.”

For the seventh consecutive year, Fields of View had been featured in the ‘Global Go To Think Tank Index Report’ by the University of Pennsylvania that ranks public policy research organisations worldwide in the ‘Best New Idea or Paradigm developed by a Think Tank’ category and since 2017 we have been featured as one of the Top Think Tanks in "China, India, Japan and the Republic of Korea.” Yet, funding is always a challenge, the team says. “If you compare our budget to the others in that list, ours is pretty laughable. But that’s part of the journey,” the co-founder said.





When asked about how we can get more people involved in policy-making since most have no interest, Sruthi immediately interrupts, “People who are affected by policy want to participate. Only some have the privilege of apathy. Working people, people in garment factories, for them there is a need and requirement to participate. Their needs are crucial information for policymakers. People want to participate, they are smart enough to take a call; these tools just act as facilitators. People know what they want, the institutions need to find a way to give it to them. That’s how you get sensible policy.”

However, Sruthi stresses that just have these tools are not enough, ‘tools are not magic wands’ and they are not making any ‘grand claims’ she says. “Just having these tools doesn’t mean we don’t need social movements. We don’t make any grand claims. We think we can do meaningfully well, play an effective role in the ecosystem. Participation is massively important. In policymaking, caste, class and gender play a huge role. We need to have diverse voices and these tools, they operate in the social context, they open up avenues,” she explained. “Policymaking is not easy, live in a complex world and we face interconnected problems. Policymaking is not black and white, at the onset we need to include needs and preferences of diverse stakeholders,” the team believes.

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