# "People need a call to action": Piyush Tewari of SaveLIFE on policy frameworks, Good Samaritan laws, and co-designing solutions with people on the ground.

**Sanne Breimer**
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**Sanne Breimer: Can you please introduce yourself and describe the problem that you are addressing?**

**Piyush Tewari:** My name is Piyush Tewari. I'm the founder and CEO of the SaveLIFE Foundation. We are a specialist nonprofit organization based out of India, and we are committed to saving lives on roads across India and the developing world. We do this through a combination of preventing road crashes and enabling competent and rapid response post the occurrence of a crash. These are our two focus areas. We bring attention to the issue by creating policy frameworks, and in many cases, helping implement those frameworks. We work on the ground to listen to the community and also to develop solutions that might be replicable at scale.

This combination helps bring attention to the issue and creates viable models for solving the problem, which is that road crashes are the eighth leading cause of death globally, with about 1.2 million fatalities globally last year. More than 90% of these are in low and middle-income countries like India. India has more than 150,000 deaths each year because of road crashes and close to a million injuries and disabilities as a result of this issue.

**Sanne Breimer: Could you briefly expand on the policy frameworks?**

**Piyush Tewari:** In India specifically, we realized that the principal legislation around road safety was first introduced in 1939, which was pre-India's independence, and before any kind of revolution around motorization. The law was then adopted by independent India through a very comprehensive amendment in 1988. And that was three years before India's economic revolution.

At that point of time, I don't think that road crashes per se were a big issue, but if you look at just the last decade, India has lost more than a million people to road crashes alone, and close to 10 million people have been left seriously injured or disabled for life. It was very important for us to look at the policy framework and see if there were aspects within the policy framework that were either insufficient or deficient or entirely missing.

I'll give you an example. In the 1988 law, there were no provisions for protection of children during commute. And a large number of children, close to 14,000 children and young adolescents, lose their lives in road crashes every year in India. It's a big issue, but the law did not have any provisions to protect children back in the 1988 law. We advocated for a comprehensive amendment to the law, which in 2019, for the first time, introduced concepts like child restraint systems, adult accountability, and children wearing helmets on motorcycles.

Many frameworks were created that will now enable better implementation on the ground and therefore better save the lives of children who are exposed to crashes while they're moving on the roads. That's been one big part of our focus. Another part of our focus in the policy framework has been to ensure that trauma care, which is post-crash care, becomes accessible and is competent to be able to save lives.

We were also able to secure a Good Samaritan Law back in 2016 through the intervention of India's Supreme Court, which got passed at the Parliament in 2019. That Good Samaritan Law provided a bridge between an injured person and formal trauma services, because a bystander or a good Samaritan is the one that will trigger the response from these agencies.

Now we are working on a more comprehensive trauma care policy for the country that includes everything from who you call for help, how you call, who arrives on scene, what kind of help they provide you during transit, and what happens when you arrive at a facility. Are they already aware that you're arriving? The entire chain, which we call the chain of survival, is something that we are looking to now legislate or get integrated into the system so that it gets recognized as a system and not as individual silos that need to be looked at. That's been our overall focus in the policy realm.

**Sanne Breimer: What makes your approach distinct, and why did you choose that approach?**

**Piyush Tewari:** I think what makes SaveLIFE Foundation's approach distinct is that we are not just a policy advocacy organization or just a grassroots organization. We are both. And that

means a lot of insights that are gained from the ground then feed the policy framework that we are trying to work on. It is not purely theoretical or solely based on international guidance. A lot of it comes with a fair amount of cultural empathy. It comes with a deeper understanding of implementation issues on the ground—what works and what doesn't.  That's what makes our approach unique: we combine policy and on-ground efforts, not just one or the other. Both programs feed off each other, enabling policies to be more practical, more implementable, and the on-ground programs to be more effective in that process. That's one aspect of uniqueness.

The second piece is that SaveLIFE is entirely driven by evidence. We look at secondary evidence that's available from government and police sources, but we also do a lot of investigations and a lot of research on our own. That brings a lot of interesting primary data into our policy work that then drives value in terms of the conversations and in terms of the approaches that we are taking. These two aspects make our approach competent and unique in many ways.

**Sanne Breimer: Who or what inspired this work? And did you start with this idea, or did it evolve in a way that it is now?**

**Piyush Tewari:** One of the things about SaveLIFE is that many of us, including myself, represent families that have lost people to road crashes. In 2007, I lost a young family member to a road crash, and that is what triggered the formation of SaveLIFE nine months later in 2008. We've been working on this issue now for 16 years, and trying to address various facets of it. But the inspiration unfortunately came from loss.

At present, all of us are motivated to reduce and prevent that loss for other families who go through such devastating experiences.That's really what our work is driven towards at this point of time. The inspiration to be data-driven has come through evolution of our work. We started as an organization that was advocating for a Good Samaritan Law. In the process of getting the Good Samaritan Law passed eight years later, we learned valuable insights into the root causes of road crashes.

We then focused on collecting more evidence and data around that, which gave us a deeper understanding of how to fix the problem. We then adopted various highways in India to try and reduce fatalities there, and we had success in many ways. We've seen close to a 60% drop in deaths on some of the deadliest roads now.

It's been an evolutionary process to arrive at this model that we have today. Even in our advocacy strategy—how to work with policymakers, how to work with the community—I believe it's something we learned in a uniquely original way and we've applied strategies that I have not heard anyone apply in policy advocacy so far. We brought, for example, strategies around market segmentation from business into policy advocacy, where we said that it's important to segment your audience so that you are addressing the problem in a way that they can understand and appreciate.

When we engaged with the Parliament of India, we identified key groups of parliamentarians who could support our cause, each bringing their unique perspectives and responsibilities. We communicated the issue in ways that aligned with their specific roles within the Parliament.

For example, for serious issues like, child sexual abuse, many parliamentarians across the world might have a personal connection to this issue—either as survivors themselves or through family and friends. These individuals naturally become strong advocates for the cause and we need to identify them as vocal allies.

Additionally, there are parliamentarians who sit on committees tasked with addressing such issues, such as internal affairs or police committees. Different countries have different ways of looking at it. These parliamentarians play a crucial role in developing and implementing solutions, and we can work closely with them to advance the necessary measures.

The socio-economic impact of child sexual abuse is also profound, affecting the productivity and growth of future generations. Economists and policymakers concerned with the country's economic health recognize the long-term losses associated with this issue. We can engage these leaders by highlighting the economic implications, the strain on health (both physical and mental) and legal services, fostering a shared understanding of the problem.

And then finally, some policymakers and leaders are focusing on the reputation of their country. A high incidence of child sexual abuse cases can damage its image, and these leaders are keen to address the issue to protect public trust. We can discuss the problem with them from the perspective of societal well-being and national reputation.

When addressing road crashes, we followed a similar approach within India's Parliament. By identifying and collaborating with supportive members, technical experts, economic analysts, and those concerned with public safety, we were able to unite over 100 parliamentarians to advocate for changes. This collective effort led to comprehensive amendments to India's road safety laws in 2019. The lessons learned from these strategies have empowered us to effectively implement policies, secure broader support, and align stakeholders with our goals.

**Sanne Breimer: Can you share an example that illustrates the impact of your work? And how did you know it was working?**

**Piyush Tewari:** A classic success story that I can share with you of SaveLIFE's work has been around one of India's deadliest highways. There is a highway that connects the cities of Mumbai and Pune in the state of Maharashtra. Of course, many people know about Mumbai, but Pune is also a large city in the State. It's an approximately 100-kilometer road that connects the two highways. And just on that 100-kilometer road, more than 150 people were dying as of 2016 when we took up that highway.

We adopted our standard strategy: We identified partners and champions who could work with us within the government. We found some initial data that we could use to understand where exactly on that highway the problem was happening. We then conducted forensic investigation of crashes to gather deeper data and understanding of what was going on. Once we figured out that on that road there were more than 4,000 road engineering issues, we presented this evidence to the government and convinced them to start fixing each of those issues systematically.

Convincing requires strategy—identifying partners and champions, and communicating in a language that they understand. We convinced the government to start fixing those issues and deploy more resources. We were able to use philanthropy to bring in some funds from our side, to show proof of concept, to show how some things ought to be done, which were then scaled by the government by putting significant funds. That road has now seen a 58% drop in deaths since we started working on it in 2016.

We then replicated that model on 22 other highways. And to date, we have seen an average drop in deaths of 31%, with maximum being 65% on one of the roads. The success of our work is that we have been able to use data analytics, technology, our engagement with the community and with policymakers to affect a lasting change on that one particular highway, which then got replicated to close to two dozen more roads.

**Sanne Breimer: Could you describe something that you tried but that didn't work, but that taught you an important lesson?**

**Piyush Tewari:** I can share a specific incident from which we learned two things: The importance of listening to the community and cultural empathy. We realized that it's crucial to look at the cultural ethos of the region in which we are working to be able to provide solutions that fit within those cultural contexts.

On one of the roads that we work on, there was a five-kilometer downward slope section with the highest number of fatalities compared to the remaining 95-kilometer road. There were mass-casualty incidents: trucks would come down, their brakes would heat up, they would ram into multiple vehicles therefore losing a large number of people.

We tried a number of things. We did speed-calming measures. They didn't work. We put a camera there to alert people that they will be fined for excessive speeding. That didn't work there either. And then in one of the meetings, a junior police officer asked us, "Why don't you put up streetlights to enable better illumination on that particular section? Maybe that will work." Our immediate response was that all the global studies around road safety say that illumination in downward slopes actually doesn't work. It might be counterproductive, because it might give people confidence to speed more as they can see farther. So we kept saying no to it, but the crashes kept happening.

On one occasion, I ended up having another interaction with this junior police officer, and he was able to convince me to try it for at least one kilometer, if not the entire five kilometers. Then we said, "Okay, fine. We've tried everything else. Nothing else worked. Let's see if this might work." So we convinced the government to illuminate a one-kilometer section of that high fatality zone. And guess what? It worked. On that one-kilometer section we stopped having crashes.

The reason was that the global guidance, which came from Europe and US mostly, assumed that most vehicles will be in good condition, with visible tail lights, strong reflectors, and good signage. However, in an Indian cultural scenario, the trucks' tail lights are hardly visible from a distance because they travel from muddy areas.

You can't have depth perception if you can't see tail lights at night. I believe that was a valuable lesson in humility. It emphasized the importance of not solely relying on data or global guidelines, but also listening to the community, police officers, and those on the ground who experience the issues daily, and learning from their insights. Then we were able to get the entire five kilometer section illuminated. In the last six months, where there may have been over a dozen crashes, there has only been one.

That's been a great learning for us, that no matter what kind of engineering expertise we might have internally, what kind of data expertise we might have, what kind of global research might be available with us, it's always important to acknowledge and listen to those on the ground. Ever since we did that, I have made it mandatory across the organization that anything we do on the ground has to happen in close consultation with the community that is the beneficiary. And we've been doing it. It's not like we were not doing it earlier, but it has to be formalized. It has to be made an integral part of the system so that the solutions being developed can be accepted by the local community and not just be pressed upon them.

**Sanne Breimer: Aside from funding, what are the main challenges that you have faced or that you're currently facing, and how did you solve them? And are there any that haven't been solved to your satisfaction?**

**Piyush Tewari:** There are a couple of challenges besides funding that we face. One challenge is the necessity to confront trauma every day. We have teams in the organization that see blood and gore every single day. I often wake up in the morning looking at crash reports that arrive on WhatsApp or post mortem reports of crashes.

I think the necessity to confront trauma is an ongoing challenge. Over the next few months, we will institute a process in the organization where anybody who confronts a death or a serious incident that they might be responding to or investigating, will have to check in with a mental health specialist to address that. That's one challenge that we want to proactively address that many in the organization, including myself, see and suffer from every day.

The second piece is that when there were about a dozen people in the organization, it was easy to hire and reach twenty people, and then thirty people, and then fifty people, and then sixty people. But as you are scaling to go national and global, you need to be able to attract talent into the organization. I think it becomes a challenge at scale. It's no longer about hiring one person; it's about hiring teams. For example, we are increasingly using AI data analytics, predictive learning, and LLMs [large language models] in our work. It's not easy for a nonprofit to set up a technology team, because we are not a tech company. And to set up a capable technology team that has a growth path—you're competing with the best IT companies in the world.

These are the kinds of challenges that we face: access to talent, access to capital, access to mental health expertise.

**Sanne Breimer: Is shifting cultural norms part of the work you're doing? How do you do this, and what strategies or solutions are mostly effective at shifting society's view of the problem?**

**Piyush Tewari:** Yes. A classic example of that is our work on the Good Samaritan Law. We conducted a national-level survey which revealed that three out of every four people in India were not going to come forward to help an injured person. And we knew that 88% of those three out of four people would not come forward, not because of apathy, but because of a very profound fear of the law, that they might get implicated in the case. They might get intimidated by the police. They might have to appear in court frequently.

Many people on the roads who could potentially be good samaritans, earn their living on a day-to-day basis.They can't afford to be gone for hours or days in court procedures. It was a real issue that the victim would die on the road waiting for help, and nobody would even make a phone call.

There's been a cultural shift that has happened in a decade of the work that we've carried out in this space. And that culture shift happened not only because we were encouraging people to help, but we gave them protection through the law that they will not be harassed, not be intimidated, that they will not have to go through prolonged procedures. It is not merely awareness that works. I think it is the confidence that the law will back you as opposed to creating trouble for you, that helps people.

In many cases, even in the case of drug overdose or other serious issues like child sexual abuse that we see, I think Good Samaritans can play a very critical role in preventing, in responding, in ensuring that that doesn't happen again. But that'll happen in countries like India and maybe many other low and middle income countries if we are able to give people the confidence that they will not be affected for that act of being a good samaritan that they're performing.

What we are doing today on the Good Samaritan Law is to strengthen that even further on the district level. India has 750 districts. In each district we're trying to set up a grievance redressal mechanism, so that people know exactly who to go to, what complaint to file and what actions to expect.

**Sanne Breimer: What role do partnerships or coalitions play in pushing your work forward? How do you cultivate and maintain the partnerships in the work?**

**Piyush Tewari:** At SaveLIFE, we work on three types of partnerships. One is our close partnership with the government. Our goal at SaveLIFE is to institutionalize what works. Ultimately, we want to become redundant. There should be a day in the future where we are not required to exist. And that will only happen if we are able to institutionalize what works, if we're able to embed what works into government systems, so that the systems that were supposed to operate competently in the first place are able to operate competently now. We work with close to half a dozen government agencies, including police organizations, road-building organizations, health departments, administrative bodies, and so on.

Our second set of partnerships are academic partnerships. We work with medical colleges, universities, engineering colleges, not just to get access to talent but also collaborate with them on building our own capacity. For instance, recently in India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh [UP], we worked with the Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur to undertake a study around speeding trends across the state. UP is so large, its population is 265 million people. We were able to expand our own capacity by partnering with IIT Kanpur to undertake the study. Similarly, we have a partnership with the trauma team at All India Institute of Medical Sciences at Rishikesh and we get a lot of great inputs and insights on our trauma response work from there.

The third of the partnerships we have are philanthropic partnerships. We have philanthropists with capital who support us, not just in terms of funding but in many cases access to expertise. One of our philanthropic partners, RippleWorks, has also given us access to incredible resources around human resource management. They provide us access to experts. They've helped SaveLIFE develop employee value proposition. We have access to their top leadership to discuss HR issues. They're very vested in our success, not only from a financial sustainability standpoint but also from an organizational strength and sustainability standpoint. I think those kinds of partnerships strengthen us much beyond simple funding partnerships.

**Sanne Breimer: What insights or teachable lessons can be taken from your work that others can learn from?**

**Piyush Tewari:** Number one is to listen to the community. Second has been to look at data and evidence and not be guided by intuition alone. It is very important to see what the evidence is talking about, where it's guiding you. Of course, data is hard to come by. But whatever data we can get our hands on, whatever guidance it can provide us, we need to look at that.

Always engage with policymakers using language that resonates with their specific roles and responsibilities. Everyone cares about the issue, but each policymaker has unique duties to fulfill. By framing our message in ways that connect directly to their work, we can build meaningful partnerships and gain their support more effectively than by simply emphasizing the importance of the issue itself.

And finally build a great team around you. I don't think that the kind of problems that we're trying to solve can be solved by an individual alone. I think we need to have a solid team. We need to have people who are equally passionate, equally professional, equally qualified to be able to solve some of these complex issues that we are facing.

**Sanne Breimer: In reaching out to allies in their language, you need to have some political knowledge. Did you get any advice from somebody in that field? How did that work?**

**Piyush Tewari:** We evolved our advocacy model through our learnings. Initially, when I was advocating for the Good Samaritan Law, I would simply go and speak to everybody, tell them about my loss, tell them about how so many families were losing loved ones because of this issue. And I realized that everybody was sympathetic. I didn't meet a single person who didn't say this was an important issue. But they were not able to act, because I was not able to tell them how they can help us in their specific role.

Today I can tell the Transport Minister of India as well as the Finance Minister of India how they can help us. Even though, logically, people might think this is just the role of the Transport Minister of India. But no, the Health Minister of India has a role to play. The Finance Minister of India has a role to play. Even the Foreign Minister of India has a role to play in this.

That evolution happened because we learned very quickly that people need a call to action and a cause for action, and we have to give them both. A call to action is what they have to do. A cause for action is why they have to do it. And a cause for action is always linked to their job role. And if you can link your cause for action to their job role, it'll be much easier to bring them on board as an ally. You have to give them a clear call to action. Do you want a policy? Do you want more budget? Do you want better implementation? What are you asking for?

We have a great board at SaveLIFE, including a former judge of the Supreme Court, former police officers, lawyers, doctors, and industry people. We benefit from a range of diverse opinions and ideas. The reason why it's important to have a good team and advisors around you is because you brainstorm with them about these things. Surrounding yourself with good people overall, advisors and your operations team, is crucial to be able to succeed in this.

**Sanne Breimer: What do you think has the potential to make a significant impact in this field in the next five years?**

**Piyush Tewari:** One key factor is certainly technology. And when I talk about technology, I want you to think beyond cars. I want you to think about technology in trucks, tractors, buses. I want you to think about satellite technology that can help map conflict on highways and at intersections. At SaveLIFE, we have a tremendous amount of data with us, but now the time has come to use technology to start doing predictive analysis around that, to see if we can predict a crash if certain conditions are met.

The second piece I would say is that when we talk about policy and innovation, it is either policy chasing innovation or innovation chasing policy. A great example of policy chasing innovation is Uber. Uber came first, and the policies around that came later. And then in other cases, you have more progressive policy, and then innovation comes from within that. I think what's going to make a big difference is innovators and policymakers working together, so nobody's chasing the other. There is sync and no loss of time in solutions coming forward.

What we are seeing is that both policymakers and innovators today are increasingly open to working with each other. NITI Aayog in India is implementing this model—an entire floor is packed with innovators, packed with young entrepreneurial people who are trying to solve problems, who are trying to implement policies, and they're working together. I think technology combined with innovation and policy, can change the game for this issue.

The third and final thing that would make a big difference is a lot more philanthropic capital directed towards this area. Oftentimes, road crashes are perceived to be car crashes, reflecting certain regional transportation dynamics especially in the West. However a car is only driven by somebody who has the means. But in India and other low middle income countries, two thirds of those killed or injured in road crashes are not in cars. They're pedestrians, they're cyclists, they're two-wheeler riders because they simply don't have equitable access to safety.

So it is a human rights issue. What good is a right to education if 14,000 children each year are killed while just going to school? What good is talk about women's safety if 93,000 women have been killed in road crashes in just the last three years? The issue of road safety requires a lot more philanthropic interest. We have to understand that roads are not really infrastructure. They are fundamentally the platform to access our rights to livelihood, to education, to health. And if we ignore this very important artery to those rights, we will never be able to fully deliver those rights to our beneficiaries. It is time that this issue is viewed as a crucial public health issue, so that more support and more philanthropic capital will come in. I think that if these three things get aligned, it could really make a huge difference in the next five years.

**Sanne Breimer: How do you engage philanthropists to care about this issue? What do you think are the main strategies to get philanthropists to allocate funding to solve the problem?**

**Piyush Tewari:** Addressing this issue has been challenging for several reasons. Firstly, it necessitates donor education to ensure our supporters fully understand the scope of our work. Additionally, it requires us to establish our presence on the right platforms. It's essential for us to communicate this issue accurately as a human rights concern, emphasizing the fundamental right to equitable access to safety and care in the event of an incident. I think it's a sustained effort. Things have gotten much better over the last few years. This year SaveLIFE won the Skoll Award for Social Innovation, which is the world's most prestigious honor for social innovation. And I think that platform has really helped us talk about this issue in a wider manner. To get public action and philanthropic support, you have to break those silos, break those echo chambers, and go out.

**Sanne Breimer: What do you mean by being on the right platforms?**

**Piyush Tewari:** Platforms that are not echo chambers. Platforms that have a wider reach. For example, it's about time that the UN General Assembly discusses this issue as a global public health issue. It's time that the World Economic Forum talks about this. The Skoll World Forum has already spoken about it, and hopefully it will continue to highlight it in the future.

I think there are wider and more neutral platforms that are required to talk more about this issue so people understand how grave it is and how it impacts society at large. India, for example, loses 3% of its GDP every year because of road crashes. It can eradicate hunger from India—it's that kind of money. If we lose that, that's a leakage happening due to road crashes. I think it's important to talk about this issue as a wider public health and social economic issue than merely as an infrastructure issue.

**Sanne Breimer: Thank you.**

*Sanne Breimer (she/her) is a freelance journalism trainer, project manager and adviser for international media organizations including SembraMedia, Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF), European Journalism Centre, Thibi, and the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU). She founded Inclusive Journalism, aiming to educate (primarily) Western journalists about media representation and decolonisation through a weekly newsletter, online courses and retreats. Sanne works remotely and divides her time between Europe and South East Asia. Before moving into training, Sanne worked at a managerial level in national public broadcasting in the Netherlands for almost 13 years, focusing on radio, digital media and innovation. She is Dutch with Frisian roots.*

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