

# Improving Government Effectiveness in India

Episode 70 | Big Ideas

Karan Nagpal

Transcript

April 20, 2026

Nagpal, Karan. "Improving Government Effectiveness in India." Episode 70 of Big Ideas. XKDR Forum, April 20, 2026. Video. <https://www.xkdr.org/viewpoints/improving-government-effectiveness-in-india-big-ideas-ep-70>

## Abstract

The Indian state serves 1.4 billion people, making even small improvements in its effectiveness potentially transformative for human welfare. Karan Nagpal, India Regional Director at IDinsight, has spent years working with both central and state governments to improve how they spend their two largest budget items: employee salaries and policy programs.

The conversation explores why governments need external partners to experiment with new approaches, how to overcome bureaucratic defensiveness around performance measurement, and the critical difference between using data for evaluation versus learning. Nagpal argues for "policy-driven evidence" rather than "evidence-based policy," emphasizing that successful reform requires deep empathy for the political economy constraints that government officials navigate daily.

His optimism stems from observing that political leaders increasingly understand the electoral benefits of effective service delivery, creating incentives for state capacity building that didn't exist before.

## Supplementary Resources

- **Four Challenges to Building Capacity in Government** by Madhav Seth (IDinsight article) [3]
- **Strengthening State Capacity to Improve Service Delivery for Citizens in India** by Karan Nagpal et al. (IDinsight project) [2]
- **Enhancing Evidence Use in Government Social Programs** by T. Arthur Chibwana (IDinsight article) [1]

[00:00:08]  
**Interviewer:**

Hello and welcome to a new episode of Big Ideas. Today we have Karan Nagpal, India Regional Director at IDinsight New Delhi. Karan leads partnership with the government and integrates data with evidence-based policy decision making. His, uh, area of expertise ranges from state capacity, primary health-care to financial inclusion.

[00:00:08]  
**Interviewer:**

We welcome you, Karan.

[00:00:31]  
**Karan Nagpal:**

Thank you. It's nice to be here.

[00:00:34]  
**Interviewer:**

Yeah. So today we will be talking about improving the effectiveness of India's state. So Karan, all yours.

[00:00:42]  
**Karan Nagpal:**

Yeah, so something I have been working on for the last many years is trying to improve the effectiveness of the Indian state. And when I think through the arc of the kind of work I have done, I would say that, you know, and all of this is ex post theorization. Um, essentially you think about governments, you know, sort of governments spend a lot of money in India and sort of world over.

[00:01:03]  
**Karan Nagpal:**

And the two main things the governments spend money on, one is sort of, uh, salaries, so the, you know, sort of compensation they pay to their employees. And the second is policies and programs or schemes. And so the largest parts of my work have been on improving the effectiveness of each of those areas. And so one part of my work has taken the form of supporting sort of, uh, capacity building efforts both at the central government level through Mission Karmayogi, but also in different states.

[00:01:35]  
**Karan Nagpal:**

Um, helping them build, uh, measurement systems or performance management systems to improve the performance of the, uh, people that constitute the state, the personnel of the state, which is then going to improve the fiscal expenditure that happens on salaries and wages, right? Because the government is going to get more out of those employees.

[00:01:55]  
Karan Nagpal:

Uh, and the second part has been in helping governments build sort of outcomes focused tracking systems that can help them think through, okay, we are spending this much money, but is it actually improving the outcomes we care about or not? And of course, those two, uh, areas are tied in that, you know, you should start by helping governments think through what is it that they want to achieve at a high level, you know, and then drill down to sort of, uh, more granular KPIs or sort of key performance indicators.

[00:02:23]  
Karan Nagpal:

And from that, you know, you actually help them see, am I achieving that or not? And to achieve that, they require the staff that constitute the state to be performing in a certain way, and they need to understand are they performing as well as they should or not. So that's kind of been the range of my work over the last few years.

[00:02:41]  
Interviewer:

Yeah, so like, why can't it happen on its own? Like why external partners are needed in this?

[00:02:47]  
Karan Nagpal:

I think part of it is goes down to sort of what makes the sort of, uh, state, uh, much more inclined towards the status quo. And that's because, you know, some of these sort of efforts, uh, they are new, so they are risky. And I think, uh, there is a role to be played, uh, for sort of trying out different approaches, experimenting, piloting, failing.

[00:03:11]  
Karan Nagpal:

A lot of this is very difficult to do through government systems, because government systems, when government itself is doing something, it needs to be sure that that thing will work. Uh, whereas, you know, for it to be sure that it works, it needs some degree of sort of risk, uh, capital, risk appetite. And that typically is provided by external partners who can then do that sort of experimentation, uh, learn from that, and then scale that, uh, to, you know, business as usual only when it works.

[00:03:42]  
Karan Nagpal:

And so I think there's that. I think the other sort of point is that a lot of these, uh, a lot of these, uh, measures, right? I, both outcomes-focused governance, but also performance management, um, they require, there isn't an intrinsic defensiveness of the state to doing these things, because, you know, uh, there is an intrinsic defensiveness to, uh, changing the way we operate or having our performance be measured.

[00:04:05]  
Karan Nagpal:

And I think, um, you know, and so it takes a lot of, uh, effort to build the case for the importance of doing this type of work. And I think hence, sort of we see our role and sort of I see my role as being sort of somebody who can catalyze that change, uh, through sort of, uh, partnering with, uh, sort of mission-driven, willing bureaucrats, uh, decision makers today, showing that this works, showing that doing this actually improves outcomes for citizens, which is what we all care about. And then using that to then sort of improve gradually how the Indian state does its business.

[00:04:42]  
Interviewer:

Right. So this, uh, brings to my next question. So you have worked across multiple states and central government. What are the biggest obstacles to getting bureaucrats to genuinely adopt evidence-based, uh, practices?

[00:04:56]  
Karan Nagpal:

I would actually turn that question around. So I think, uh, so my story is that I was sort of, I began my sort of, I did my PhD. I was an academic, you know, and I was kind of schooled in this whole area of evidence-based policy making. Um, and somehow, you know, sort of the technocratic sort of sector out sitting outside of government, sitting outside of civil society, we think that's evidence-based policy making is a good thing.

[00:05:19]  
Karan Nagpal:

But I think it's important to interrogate evidence, what evidence means, what constitutes evidence, what counts as good evidence, um, and who decides what is evidence, you know? And so in some sense, uh, a lot of my approach for the last seven and a half years that I've been at IDinsight has been to flip that around and sort of to think about policy-driven evidence rather than evidence-based policy.

[00:05:41]  
Karan Nagpal:

I think, uh, people who constitute the Indian state, be they political leadership, ministers, their advisors, be it bureaucrats, uh, middle management, frontline workers, they are incredibly hardworking people who are optimizing within very difficult constraints. And I think often I have realized that sort of in the academic community, we do not appreciate or think through or have empathy for those constraints because we are living in a very different, uh, organizational culture, organizational environment.

[00:06:09]  
Karan Nagpal:

And so I think, uh, bureaucrats, uh, and sort of decision makers in governments, be they bureaucrats, be they politicians, do adopt or do change the way they are doing things, but if you actually communicate to them the evidence, or if you generate evidence that they need, that is practical, that is feasible within their constraints. And that requires a deep appreciation for, empathy with, understanding of the political economy constraints that they face.

[00:06:37]  
Karan Nagpal:

India is a very complex society, our state is very complex. The relationship between the state and society is very different across, you know, different parts of India. And so I think understanding all of that requires a lot of humility. And I think when people from outside show that humility, I think the people in the government are actually quite willing to change the way they are doing things.

[00:06:37]  
Karan Nagpal:

And I think the fault often is in the sort of, uh, those of us sitting outside the state who kind of think that, you know, we've generated evidence and now the state should accept it.

[00:07:10]  
Interviewer:

Yeah. Uh, so you were talking about the way of doing things. My question to you is there's an inherent tension between using data for evaluation versus the learning. So how should government navigate this to actually improve programs?

[00:07:25]  
Karan Nagpal:

Yeah. I think we think about this a lot, right? And I think, uh, in some ways there is a theory of change that says that actually using data for evaluations is good, right? That's how you evaluate programs and if they don't work, you know, we should change those programs, we should scrap those programs.

[00:07:25]  
Karan Nagpal:

If it works, we should scale those programs. I think we often don't think to the emotional aspects of evidence or evaluation.

[00:07:47]  
Karan Nagpal:

And I think, especially when evaluations, you know, sort of, uh, don't work, uh, I think there is often a, uh, intrinsic, instinctive, defensive mechanism, you know, that makes us all sort of, uh, be defensive about the program. And that's true for all of us as humans, right? So if, if we see that your performance is not good, it makes me feel un— if someone tells me that, I feel unsafe, I feel sort of hurt, I want to fight back, you know, because my ego is important in that moment. And that's sort of also true.

[00:08:18]  
**Karan Nagpal:**

And so I have sort of come to realize that, you know, those goals are different. Learning, using data and using evidence for learning is very different from using it for evaluation. It doesn't mean it shouldn't happen the evaluation, but I think it's important for those to be distinct parts of the state. Uh, I think my approach has been that, uh, it's actually learning is important because you ultimately want people to take better decisions over time.

[00:08:42]  
**Karan Nagpal:**

They will take those better decisions if they are learning. And it's not just individuals, right? Uh, government is a complex system. The system will take better decisions if it learns.

[00:08:42]  
**Karan Nagpal:**

But for it to learn, it needs to overcome the initial defensiveness. And I think, uh, so for us as an organization, we definitely prioritize the learning elements of it. Uh, you know, and that requires understanding when we are communicating something, uh, what language and what vocabulary should we use, how should we position it, how should we time and sequence it, you know?

[00:09:14]  
**Karan Nagpal:**

I think they've learned this even from our nonprofit partners. When we do an evaluation and say the evaluation doesn't work, it's not as if that they are all like, oh, that's excellent, great, let's, you know, you've opened our eyes, great, let's shut down this program. They're also defensive. They're also like, no, but you haven't thought through this aspect, that aspect.

[00:09:14]  
**Karan Nagpal:**

That's, you know, this context matters. And, uh, because, you know, I think they have been working hard on the program. So we have, through that work, learned that you have to take people along for the journey.

[00:09:42]  
**Karan Nagpal:**

As we learn, as we learn new things, we need to process it ourselves and we need to co-process it with our sort of partners in government and non-profits. And so I, I, we definitely, or I definitely prioritize the learning element of it, uh, because it is learning which will lead to improvements over time.

[00:09:59]  
**Interviewer:**

Right. So, um, from this conversation, you look very optimistic about your goals. So can we talk more about this or can you share some light on this?

[00:10:08]  
**Karan Nagpal:**

I think I'm optimistic because I think the Indian state is on a trajectory that it is sort of improving and it is, you know, we are building a lot of digital systems that are, you know, making the quality of the data better, more reliable. I think, you know, the Indian state and its political leadership, both at the central level, but also state level, there is a certain commitment to delivering public goods and services, to making promises to the electorate and to actually achieving those promises.

[00:10:36]  
**Karan Nagpal:**

And people have seen that when you do that, uh, you can get reelected. And so, because the political leadership knows that if they deliver, they get reelected, they care about delivery. And I think that desire, that political sort of direction that we need to deliver services to citizens and to be able to do that requires improving the state to, uh, do that. I think that's what gives me optimism.

[00:10:58]  
**Karan Nagpal:**

And I think, you know, the other sort of thing is that it's kind of like a, a, a moral imperative to work with the state. The state, the Indian state serves one point four billion people, and if we're able to make even a tiny, tiny dent in its capacity, in helping it improve, I think it would, you know, be, be a really important, uh, landmark for human welfare.

[00:11:20]  
**Interviewer:**

Completely. I completely agree with you. This was an informative talk. Thank you, Karan, for being here.

[00:11:25]  
**Karan Nagpal:**

No, thank you so much.

## References

- [1] T. Arthur Chibwana. Enhancing Evidence Use in Government Social Programs. <https://www.idinsight.org/article/the-art-of-enhancing-evidence-use-in-government-social-programs-lessons-from-a-learning-partnership-in-africa/>, July 2022. URL: <https://www.idinsight.org/article/the-art-of-enhancing-evidence-use-in-government-social-programs-lessons-from-a-learning-partnership-in-africa/>.
- [2] Karan Nagpal, Vishan Pattnaik, Udit Ranjan, Ashruth Talwar, Anjani Balu, Fahad Hasin, Gayatri Dewan, Harish Ram Sai, Priavi Joshi, Aishwarya Grover, and Jahnvi Toshniwal. Strengthening State Capacity to Improve Service Delivery for Citizens in India. <https://www.idinsight.org/project/strengthening-state-capacity-to-improve-service-delivery-for-citizens/>, September 2024. URL: <https://www.idinsight.org/project/strengthening-state-capacity-to-improve-service-delivery-for-citizens/>.
- [3] Madhav Seth. Four Challenges to Building Capacity in Government. <https://www.idinsight.org/article/four-challenges-to-building-capacity-in-government/>, October 2019. URL: <https://www.idinsight.org/article/four-challenges-to-building-capacity-in-government/>.