

UChicago scholar's COVID-19 task force creates innovative solutions in India

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Health

Prof. Anup Malani awoke to 350 messages. It was March, and India had just instituted a nationwide lockdown.

Weeks earlier, the University of Chicago scholar had formed a global task force to help the country's government battle the growing spread of COVID-19. The group brainstormed solutions, and now they were waiting for Malani to provide direction.

But it was a lot for one person to tackle. *This can't work*, Malani thought as he read the messages. The group needed more flexibility and autonomy.

The Lee and Brena Freeman Professor at the University of Chicago Law School and a professor at the Pritzker School of Medicine, Malani has forged deep ties to India

School of Medicine, Malani has forged deep ties to India throughout his career. In addition to extensive research on India's slums, economics and health care system, he co-founded the International Innovation Corps, which sends graduates from UChicago and foreign universities to developing countries to work on health, energy, technology and education projects.

As the virus spread, Malani decided to marshal the resources and network he had spent years developing.

The group started with 20 people and quickly grew to 100, recruiting the biggest names in India's business world-Facebook India, Amazon India, World Bank and Apollo, among others. Their mission: to help the government battle the economic, legal, health and logistical challenges of COVID-19 in any way they could. Members reached out to India's government with a simple message: "If you need help, let us know. We have the resources to help you problem-solve."

Right away, the problems came.

On March 24, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the lockdown on national TV, giving residents only four hours advance warning. His directive raised a critical question: How do you get essentials to 1.4 billion people in a locked-down country? As Malani slept, his screen flooded with hundreds of messages from Indian members of the task force. Everyone had an issue to be solved-how should they proceed?

Malani broke the task force into multiple teams, eventually splitting it into 25 group chats on WhatsApp. Each group was flexible, able to solve problems as they came. He remained privy to all groups but didn't receive every message; nor did he need to provide input on each potential solution. As the groups worked, Malani's doubt gave way to a new thought: *Maybe this will work.*

The task force first turned its attention to delivering goods amid a lockdown. Within 24 hours, it developed an app called e-Pass , which uses QR codes to allow authorized vehicles-often carrying food, water or medical supplies-to pass through locked borders. The Indian government quickly adopted the app countrywide. So far, the app has logged over 200,000 trips. It was the task force's first victory.

"It's exactly what we want to do," Malani said. "We wanted to identify problems, help the government figure out how to solve them, and, to extent that we need an infrastructural solution, we came up with one."

The task force kept working on multiple threads, regularly briefing Indian state governments and the Prime Minister's Office with its findings and suggestions. One group created a way for people to donate to the workers of India's informal sector. Another created a sampling technique to help Assam, a northeastern Indian state, use its small number of COVID-19 tests to roughly estimate how many residents had the virus-including people who were asymptomatic.

Then, in early April, Malani formed a new task force to statistically model COVID-19's spread through India. U.S. epidemiologists were busy fighting the pandemic stateside, so Malani reached out to a few friends to form an executive committee: Jon Gruber, an economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Manoj Mohanan of Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy; and Prof. Luis Bettencourt, who directs UChicago's Mansueto Institute of Urban Innovation. They got creative, recruiting people who weren't epidemiologists, but could create models.

"If you could do applied math, you could do stats, you could program--(you were) welcome," Malani said. Eventually, the group added epidemiologists to make sure they were on the right track.

This new task force helped NITI Aayog, the prime minister's policy think tank, compare different models projecting vastly different impacts of COVID-19 in India. They took the most useful parts of these models and created a single consolidated model-imperfect but still useful-for making short-term forecasts for India.

"We were getting questions from the central government but also from states, I think because we were very straightforward about the information," Malani said. "Our goal was to make the work ble and useable for everyone, not just people with epidemiology or statistical modeling backgrounds."

The individual task forces have created nimble cultures, Malani said, and have received a lot of support. For example, Jake Kramer and Morgen Miller, researchers from the Law School's Coase-Sandor Institute for Law and Economics, have worked long hours to provide data and analytics to multiple projects.

They work hard, Kramer said, because they believe that they're helping people: "That's what keeps me going. Providing the information we're trying to collect to policymakers will better inform them and, hopefully, the policy they create."

The pandemic has no end in sight, but Malani is eager to continue helping. He no longer wakes up to hundreds of messages, but still often takes his first call within five minutes of waking. Normally a runner, he's taken to walking on the treadmill during conference calls.

Even with all of their work, Malani is unsure what effect the task forces are having in India. Tangible results are fleeting amid an ever-changing pandemic. But through the task forces' quick action and ability to learn on the go, he hopes to help India's government keep people alive and keep its economy steady.

"We don't know what our effect is, but it has to be better than doing nothing," Malani said. "We're just doing what we can."

--This article was first published on the University of Chicago Law School website.

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