BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS AT THE UNITED NATIONS

Achieving Agenda 2030

CONTENTS

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AGENDA 2030 AND THE ROLE OF BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development sets out an ambitious plan for transforming our world over the next fifteen years: ending poverty and hunger, protecting the planet from degradation, ensuring that people can live prosperous and fulfilling lives through economic and technological growth, and eliminating fear and violence in favour of peaceful, just, and inclusive societies.

The United Nations has risen to these challenges by developing a number of programmes targeted at achieving better social, economic, and environmental outcomes. For example, in an effort to combat environmental degradation and protect life on land, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and its partners in China have built a mobile application that enables Chinese households to have their electronic waste — old refrigerators, computers, and other devices — picked up at their doorsteps and safely recycled, instead of dangerously discarded into landfills.

In order for programmes like this one to have maximum impact, they must be designed using the latest research on what drives people to meaningfully engage with programmes. For the China recycling app to be effective, people need to be aware of the app, motivated to download it, and reminded to use it when the time comes to discard a household item.

Agenda 2030 can only be achieved if we critically examine the behavioural factors that lead people to utilize programs effectively and efficiently. Research in behavioural science — regarding how people make decisions and act on them, how they

think about, influence, and relate to one another, and how they develop beliefs and attitudes — can inform optimal programme design. Behavioural science research reveals that even small, subtle, and sometimes counter-intuitive changes to the way a message or choice is framed, or how a process is structured, can have an outsized impact on the decisions we make and the actions we take[1] (see Feature A).

A behavioural pilot programme administered by Innovations for Poverty Action in Kenya strived to reduce the over 2 million childhood deaths due to diarrheal disease each year.[2] These numbers could be greatly reduced simply through water chlorination, but data from the community revealed that people were not chlorinating their water at ideal rates. So researchers asked: What barriers are preventing people from chlorinating their water, and how can we restructure the process to help motivate this behaviour?

A behavioural analysis revealed that making chlorine available for purchase only at stores was a "behavioural barrier" to chlorinating water: the system required that families proactively find the time to go to the store and remember to purchase chlorine while there. To remove the behavioural barrier, researchers streamlined the process of obtaining chlorine by setting up chlorine dispensers at the same location where people were already picking up their water. This small, low-cost change increased the presence of chlorine in people's water by 53 percent and is now being scaled up in Kenya and Malawi to help save the lives of up to 250,000 children each year.[3]

In another example, researchers in the United Kingdom ran a project aimed at motivating people to use less energy in their homes. Simply making a social comparison on people's energy bills — specifically, by telling consumers how their energy use compared to that of their neighbours — led to a significant reduction in energy consumption.[4] Along similar lines, a study from the White House Social and Behavioral Sciences Team (SBST) showed that indicating to American veterans that they had earned an employment benefit through their years of military service — as compared to simply telling them they were eligible for the benefit — led to a 9 percent increase in access to applications for the benefit.[5]

FEATURE A: BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS 101

While the behavioural science literature is vast, common principles underlie and unify many key features of human behaviour. Here is a quick guide -- "SIMPLER" -- that articulates a set of common "nudges" you can use to improve programme outcomes and efficiency.

	For example:
SOCIAL INFLUENCE	Persuade by referencing peers
IMPLEMENTATION PROMPTS	Establish steps to desired action
MANDATED DEADLINES	Make deadlines prominent
PERSONALIZATION	Use name, not generic greeting
LOSS AVERSION	Emphasize losses, not just gains
EASE	Reduce steps in a process
REMINDERS	Use phone calls, texts, postcards

Adapted from The Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency Project, sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

As these examples illustrate, public policy and programme officials around the world can achieve better outcomes — often at low or no cost — simply by leveraging our current understanding of human psychology and behaviour. Indeed, countries and organizations worldwide have taken note of the power of behavioural insights over the past decade. The World Bank, as well as governments in Australia, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and the United States have all launched dedicated initiatives to leverage behavioural insights when addressing policy challenges.

For example, the World Bank's shift toward more "people-centred" policies is seen in the launch of its Global Insights Initiative, which has established a team charged with incorporating behavioural insights into World Bank programming. Moreover, its annual World Development Report from 2015 — entitled "Mind, Society, and Behavior" — was dedicated to a discussion of compelling examples of behavioural science at work, reinforcing how the field can successfully address development challenges, such as breaking the cycle of poverty, boosting employment, and increasing immunization rates among children.[6]

Building on the success of these global efforts, in January 2016, Secretary-General BAN Ki-moon engaged the first-ever Behavioural Science Advisor to the United Nations, as a way of bringing cutting-edge behavioural science insights to the forefront of policy and programming discussions across the UN. Over the past six months, the UN Secretariat and the UNDP Innovation Facility have launched a small team of behavioural science experts — the UN Behavioural Initiative (UNBI) — charged with translating behavioural science insights into more effective and efficient UN programming and operations.

The following report highlights a series of case studies from this initiative, in which the UN is applying and testing the impact of behavioural science insights in five broad areas under Agenda 2030:

- Advancing Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment
- People: Leaving No One Behind
- Protecting the Planet
- Managing Risk and Building Resilience
- Preventing Violent Conflict and Building Peaceful Societies

Behavioural Science Advisors to the United Nations, Dr. Maya Shankar and Dr. Lori Foster, briefing Secretary-General BAN Ki-moon on the United Nations Behavioural Initiative (UNBI).

Working together with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), UNBI received over 30 proposals from country offices and global teams before selecting a final set of 10 proposals that touch 14 countries.

This report also describes two pilots that UNBI is developing to internally strengthen the UN, a key focus area articulated in Secretary-General BAN Ki-moon's five-year action agenda. Accordingly, UNBI has begun to apply behavioural insights to improve the organization's health and well-being, beginning initially with leadership development and improving performance management.

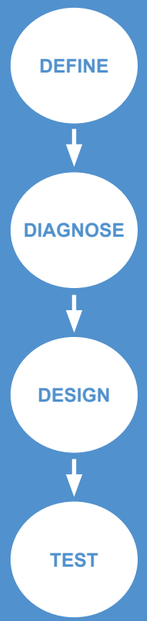
It should be noted that where possible, UNBI has embedded rigorous, randomized evaluations into these pilots to test the impact of using behavioural insights on programme outcomes (see Feature B). These research methods are important as they help to determine which behavioural interventions are effective at improving programme outcomes in specific contexts — and should therefore be brought to scale — as well as those that are not.

FEATURE B: DESIGNING A BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS PROJECT

In Busia, Western Kenya, independent researchers are interested in increasing farmers' use of modern fertilizers to boost agricultural productivity. The challenge is that farmers underutilize these fertilizers even though, when asked, nearly 98% say they want and plan to use them.

What is responsible for this mismatch between farmers' intentions and their actions? Behavioural scientists use a systematic, four-part process to help answer these types of questions:

In the case of farmers in Busia, here's what this process looks like:



Define the problem. Not enough farmers use fertilizer despite a stated intention to do so.

Diagnose each stage of the decision-making process to identify barriers to optimal decision-making and follow-through. One reason farmers may not buy and use fertilizer is a mismatch in timing. Farmers are flush with cash immediately after harvest, but this is not typically when they think to buy fertilizer. When people have cash on hand, it is tempting to spend it now, rather than save it for future things that will yield big returns. By the time planting season arrives months later, many farmers may be depleted of their harvest earnings and unable to purchase fertilizer when it is needed. Another barrier may be the hassle of a 30-minute walk to town to pick up the fertilizer.

Design a programme that breaks down these barriers. What if we offered farmers the option to purchase a voucher for fertilizer at harvest time, when they are flush with cash? Also, what we if we offer a fertilizer delivery service at no cost to farmers to reduce the hassle factor?

Test the efficacy of the intervention using rigorous evaluations. In Busia, this involved carving out a random sample of farmers, encouraging them to buy fertilizer at harvest time, offering a free delivery system, and then comparing fertilizer use in this group to other farmers. This is how behavioural scientists test and generate evidence for what does and doesn't work. In the case of Busia, results show a significant increase in fertilizer use among the test group of farmers.

Process graphic adapted from ideas42. Example adapted from Duflo, E., Kremer, M., & Robinson, J. (2011). Nudging farmers to use fertilizer: Theory and experimental evidence from Kenya. American Economic Review, 101(6), 2350-2390.

IMPROVING UNITED NATIONS PROGRAMMES WITH BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS: 10 CASE STUDIES

ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East

Combating child marriage by challenging social norms

UNICEF and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) have partnered to implement a $246 million program called the Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage, with an initial focus on 12 high burden countries in South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Child marriage is both a cause and a consequence of girls dropping out of school, especially when transitioning from primary to secondary school. The Global Programme focuses on enabling girls at risk of child marriage to choose and direct their own futures. It supports households in demonstrating positive attitudes towards adolescent girls and strengthening the systems that deliver services to adolescent girls. It also seeks to ensure laws and policies protect and promote adolescent girls' rights, highlighting the importance of using robust data to inform those policies relating to adolescent girls. The Global Programme has the potential to directly reach 2.5 million girls, in the 12 target countries, who are at risk of child marriage or are already in union by the end of 2019. Its aim is to keep an additional 179,000 girls of lower secondary school age in school by 2019.

▶**UNBI pilot:** UNBI has engaged with UNICEF and UNFPA to identify strategic entry points for engaging and changing parents' and community members' beliefs and attitudes about child marriage through wide-scale behavioural interventions at the country level. Research in behavioural science shows that in the same way the framing of a message can significantly influence people's attitudes and beliefs, so too can the characteristics

of the person delivering that message.[7] In the case of challenging norms around child marriage, the messenger should be someone with social credibility and moral influence. Given the strong historical role of religion in driving cultural norms and providing moral guidance, engaging religious leaders can be a powerful approach to promote changes in people's attitudes and actions, alongside policies and legislation against child marriage.

As such, UNBI, UNICEF and UNFPA are collaborating to empower religious leaders who are already against child marriage — "positive deviants"[8] — to influence other religious leaders and their associated communities. Social network theories shed light on the most effective ways of identifying who these influential nodes within a social network might be. These theories can help identify the most influential religious leaders to bring about change.[9] Along similar lines, this effort can leverage research showing that a sufficient number of individual connections must hold a certain opinion before any given person can be convinced of a new view by targeting religious leaders in waves.[10]

LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND

Jordan

Stabilizing livelihoods of Syrian refugees in host communities and vulnerable Jordanians through skills exchanges and employment opportunities

Forced displacement and migration continue to pose major challenges on a global scale. Some of these challenges stem from barriers that prevent refugees from using and sharing their unique skills in a meaningful and productive way in their new home. One such barrier is the discrimination and unrest that can result when people in a host community perceive that refugees are taking jobs away from those native to the region.

▶**UNBI pilot:** Behavioural insights can be applied to help turn this perception problem around. UNDP Jordan, together with its partners, are building a "Skills Exchange" pilot, which begins with an analysis of the unique and marketable job skills that Syrian refugees bring into Jordan. Syrian refugees will then be trained as mentors and given platforms to teach their skills to Jordanians who are enrolled in a skills development programme.[11] This pilot is designed to economically support Syrians and to boost their economic stability, while also helping Jordanians develop sustainable livelihoods with their newly developed skills. It will also help Jordanians see firsthand how Syrian refugees contribute to their community. UNDP and UNBI are leveraging research in behavioural science showing that opportunities for these kinds of informal exchanges and interdependent work towards a common goal can help break down prejudice and stereotypes, thus promoting regional peace and stability in Jordan.[12]

Global

Empowering the migrant workforce through skills-based qualifications

Migrants are at risk for both unemployment and underemployment, such that their work skills are underutilized in their new homeland. This can lead to skills atrophy, with implications for economic and psycho-social well-being and stability at individual, community, and country levels.[13] Migrants' underemployment has a variety of causes and is not due solely to biases on the part of community members and hiring employers. Part of the problem is technical in nature. At present, it is difficult for employers to understand the expertise level of a migrant worker whose skills were tested and verified in a different country.

▶**UNBI pilot:** In collaboration with UNESCO, UNBI is addressing problems faced by migrants whose skills are not recognized in the country to which they have moved. This problem arises from challenges mapping qualifications from one country's framework to another's. For example, it is difficult for a receiving country to know the skills of an electrician who qualifies as a "Level 3" in his or her home country, if the two countries have different ranking or evaluation systems. UNBI is serving on a multi-year, multi-country UNESCO-led expert group that is developing and examining solutions to this problem through research into how job requirements vary across countries. Job analysis techniques from the social and behavioural sciences play a central role in this initiative[14]: Using scientific methods to quantify cross-country similarities and differences in a job's tasks and skill requirements can inform the development of a more universal framework for translating qualifications from one country setting to another.

Moldova

Increasing accurate wage reporting and public investment through targeted communications

Informal employment poses a challenge in many parts of the world. In Moldova, it often takes the form of hidden wages: nearly 57% of employees are paid only a part of their wages formally and the remaining wages are given "in an envelope" to help firms avoid taxes.[15] This means there is less available money for public investments. As a result, the government of Moldova struggles to fund essential social services, putting a significant percentage of the employed population at risk of inadequate health care and social insurance.

▶**UNBI pilot:** UNDP, Moldova's National Tax Office, and UNBI are sending timely letters to firms reminding them to report wages and pay their taxes in full. Leveraging research showing that people are motivated by social norms, firms that underpay will be compared to the best firm performers to improve overall tax payments.[16] Letters will also announce that a "recognition certificate" will be given to firms if they increase tax payments by a certain percent, based on research showing that people are motivated by social recognition.[17]

China

Protecting the environment by promoting uptake of an e-waste recycling programme

In 2014, China produced 6,032 kilotonnes of discarded electrical goods ("e-waste"), including TVs, refrigerators, and computers.[18] To promote safe e-waste recycling, UNDP and its partners launched 'Baidu Recycle', a mobile app that allows Chinese households to have e-waste items picked up with a click of a button at their doorsteps and safely recycled by "e-waste recyclers". Within a year, the app arranged for the safe recycling of over 11,429 items. The service has since been scaled up beyond the original pilot cities of Beijing and Tianjin to 22 cities as of 2016.[19]

▶**UNBI pilot**: UNDP and UNBI are developing effective messaging and strategies to promote greater country awareness of Baidu Recycle and to increase usage in ten cities in China. For example, UNBI is leveraging research that shows people are highly motivated to take an action if their peers also take that action with the following outreach message: "Join the 250,000 people who are already helping to preserve our planet by e-recycling."[20] UNDP and UNBI are also working to reduce barriers to app access by creating a feature that will enable current users to easily invite friends in their social networks to download the app through a simple SMS message. Finally, as research shows that asking people at a timely moment to commit to a future action increases the likelihood that they will follow-through on that action, UNBI is recommending that retailers ask individuals when they are first purchasing a new electronic device to commit to recycling it down the line and to download the app right there and then, at the point of purchase.[21]

Bangladesh

Alleviating traffic congestion and the resultant pollution by increasing usage of a mobile phone app

In Bangladesh, home to the fourth-most polluted city in the world, people spend an average of 2.5 hours in traffic every day.[22] Increased use of public bus transportation would help to reduce both pollution and traffic congestion, but an analysis from 2014 indicates that people are deterred from taking the bus due to unreliable bus schedule information and long wait times.[23] To increase public bus transportation, UNDP and its partners developed a smartphone app called "goBD" that shows people the real-time location of buses using GPS technology, the expected time of bus arrival at their location, and an estimate of how long their journey will take.

▶**UNBI pilot:** Behavioural research demonstrates that one way to increase engagement with a programme is to send low-cost, timely messages to individuals alerting them of the value of using a product and motivating them to act.[24] As such, UNBI is currently designing "push notification" text messages that will be delivered to users just in advance of their expected morning and evening commutes. These messages will alert them of the ease of using the app, as well as the fact that their usage will reap significant benefits to the environment down the line. UNDP Bangladesh will measure the increase in users of the service accordingly.

Montenegro

Reducing carbon footprints by tourists through increased donations

"Friends of Low Carbon Montenegro" and UNDP are partnering to solicit donations from tourists to help fund one of three projects that will reduce carbon emissions: solar-powered boats, solar-powered phone charging stations in city centres, and recreational trails for hiking and biking.

▶**UNBI pilot:** UNDP and UNBI are partnering to promote donations using a range of behavioural tools. Research shows that giving people agency over how their tax dollars are invested increases tax compliance. As such, tourists are being offered a choice of how they would like to see their donations invested — i.e., a choice between solar-powered boats, solar-powered phone charging stations, and recreational trails.[25] Moreover, based on research showing that removing small barriers to taking an action can significantly increase that action[26], UNBI is streamlining the process of donating by allowing people to make cash donations at the same time they are anyway paying for their hotel stay.[27] And finally, UNDP and UNBI are designing an online calculator that allows visitors to calculate their expected carbon footprint and to donate according to the amount of carbon they expect to produce during their trip.[28]

Ecuador
Protecting the environment, improving livelihoods, and strengthening local cultural

includes projects designed to address the damage caused by the April 2016 earthquakes in Ecuador, which killed 668 people and destroyed 13,962

e-mails connect prospective donors with vivid, detailed stories of the people and projects in need of funding, which research shows is an effective way of humanizing the issues and mobilizing charitable donations.[31]

In parallel, UNBI, UNDP, and the United Nations Academic Impact initiative (UNAI), are partnering to establish and disseminate a toolkit that encourages university instructors to develop class projects that help raise funds through the GreenCrowds platform. For example, university courses teaching the psychology of persuasion, behavioural economics, or fundraising for non-profits will be given an opportunity to contribute ideas to UNDP for how to persuasively solicit donations on the web site. University courses teaching behavioural research methods can complete projects that test the effects of different messaging on donation rates. The toolkit provides examples and materials that make it easy for course instructors to integrate this into their curriculum.

FEATURE C: GENERATING EVIDENCE THROUGH RIGOROUS EVALUATIONS AN EXAMPLE FROM ECUADOR

UNBI uses rigorous research methodologies like randomized-control trials (RCTs) to directly test the impact of applying behavioural insights to UN programs. Ecuador's "GreenCrowds" project, which sent outreach e-mail messages to individuals prompting them to donate to environmentally-friendly projects, helps illustrate the process behind designing and implementing an RCT.

STEP 1
Identify original version

GreenCrowds provided its "business as usual" out-reach e-mail message to UNBI: Message A.

STEP 2
Apply behavioural insights

UNBI redesigns the e-mail message using behavioural insights that have been shown in other contexts to motivate charitable donations: this is Message B.

STEP 3
Create test groups

Each person in the population of prospective donors is randomly assigned to one of two groups: Group A will receive Message A and Group B will receive Message B. By using random assignment, each group is expected to share similar characteristics on average — such as donation history and disposable income. Thus, any difference in donation rates between the two groups following the e-mails can be solely attributed to the behavioural insights UNBI inserted into Message B.

STEP 4
Conduct test

Group A (the "control group") is sent Message A and Group B (the "treatment group") is sent the behaviourally-informed Message B. The presence of a control group allows UNBI to observe how much people would have donated if there had been no behavioural intervention at all.

STEP 5
Measure results and compare the two groups

Who is more likely to make donations: those who received Message A or those who received Message B? UNBI conducts statistical analyses to determine whether any differences in donation rates between the two groups are "statistically significant" — that is, reliable rather than due to chance.

STEP 6
Scale up

Based on the results of the trial, GreenCrowds can scale up the more effective messaging to the entire population in future outreach so that everyone can benefit from the intervention.