The Behavioural Lens: Taking a Behavioural Vantage Point to Improve the Success of Development Programmes

Summary

Successful programmes and policies require supportive behaviour from their targeted populations. Understanding what drives human reactions is crucial for the design and implementation of development programmes. Research has shown that people are not rational agents and that providing them with financial or material incentives is often not enough to foster long-term behavioural change. For this reason, the consideration of behavioural aspects that influence an individual's actions, including the local context, has moved into the focus of development programmes. Disregarding these factors endangers the success of programmes. The World Bank brought this point forward forcefully with its 2015 World Development Report, "Mind, Society and Behavior", herewith supporting the focus on behavioural insights within development policies. While agencies may intuitively consider behavioural aspects during programme design and implementation, a systematic approach would improve programme effectiveness at a relatively small financial cost. For this reason, we present a framework – the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) – that aids practitioners and researchers alike in considering important determinants of human behaviour during the design and implementation of development programmes. The TPB suggests considering important determinants of human behaviour, such as the individual's attitude towards the intervention (influenced by previous knowledge, information or learning); subjective norms (influenced by important people, such as family members or superiors); and the individual's sense of behavioural control (influenced by a subjective assessment of barriers and enablers). The theory should be used early on in the programme design to perform a structured assessment of behavioural aspects in the appropriate context. Components of the TPB can often be addressed through cost-effective, easy changes to existing programmes. Simple guiding questions (see Box 1) can help integrate the theory into the programme design. An iterative and inclusive process, particularly in exchange with the targeted population and other stakeholders, increases success.

The rise of behaviourally informed programmes and policies

The success of programmes and policies depends largely on the actions and choices of the people they target. Programmes fail when people choose not to participate or when they behave differently than expected. For schools to be effective, children need to attend classes. For vaccination programmes to work, parents must bring their children to health centres. Innovative solutions, such as solar cookers or insecticide-treated bed nets, are only beneficial when used as intended. Hence, it is essential to understand the factors that shape behavioural responses. What attitudes drive and motivate people to behave in a certain way? What beliefs are barriers to their participation? How does the social environment, which includes peers and family, influence an individual's behaviour? The answers to these questions form what individuals perceive as desirable, do-able or even thinkable in their lives. Furthering the understanding of these questions can help in designing programmes that work by fostering supportive behaviour of the targeted populations.

Behavioural insights – informed by diverse research fields, including economics, psychology and neuroscience – can help answer these questions and provide a new lens through which to better acknowledge behavioural determinants in the design and implementation of programmes and policies worldwide. This applies to various policy areas across different population groups in high- and low-income countries. Behavioural insights have received growing attention in recent years from a range of governments and institutions worldwide. Several international organisations, including the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OEDC), the World Bank, the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU), argue for the need to expand the understanding of the factors that influence human behaviour and its use in shaping more effective public policy. Several countries have created national behavioural units, including the UK, Canada, Germany, France, Australia and Denmark. Those activities have generated a surge of practical applications of behavioural insights in high- and low-income countries to design innovative policy solutions in a wide range of domains, like employment, health, taxation, transport and environment. Following this still relatively recent trend, we aim to offer a handy framework that will enable policy makers and practitioners to more easily consider behavioural determinants during the design and implementation of programmes in the field of development cooperation.

Behavioural insights in development interventions

Policy makers increasingly base their funding decisions on evidence of what works and are also interested in learning why certain programmes work in order to facilitate scale-up and implementation in different contexts.

Policies work best when designed and implemented to match the specific context in which people take decisions. Development programmes are no exception to this rule. Programmes can be improved by acknowledging the circumstances and characteristics of the targeted population.

This means identifying motivators and potential barriers as well as understanding the social environment during the design and implementation of a programme. Those changes in design and implementation are often small, and implementers can increase efficiency at a low cost. For example, in a project in Kenya, researchers noticed that even though the target group knew the benefits of chlorinated water and had the financial means to buy chlorine tablets, they did not do so. The researchers identified time constraints and physical effort as behavioural barriers for buying chlorine in the remotely located supermarkets. Installing chlorine dispensers where individuals got their water was an easy and cheap solution. Another example has to do with child marriage, which is still prevalent in many world regions and about which it has been difficult to change parents' and communities beliefs and attitudes. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) have engaged with religious leaders that have social credibility and moral influence within the targeted communities to change existing ideas and norms regarding child marriage. Here, not only does the message matter, but also the characteristics of the person conveying the information.

Understanding behavioural determinants with the Theory of Planned Behaviour

One helpful framework to better understand the factors that influence the reaction to an intervention is the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). The theory's ability to be applied to a variety of domains (such as education, health, finance, environment, agriculture and consumption) across cultural and geographical settings makes it particularly useful for development interventions. The TPB helps to identify and address mechanisms that influence human behaviour, thereby improving development programmes.

According to the TPB, attitudes towards performing a given behaviour, subjective norms associated with that behaviour and one's perceived control over the behaviour influence intentions. Intentions determine actual human behaviour.

Attitudes capture an individual's evaluation of a behaviour. More favourable attitudes, that is, judging an activity to be beneficial, make it more likely that individuals will perform

Figure 1: The Theory of Planned Behaviour
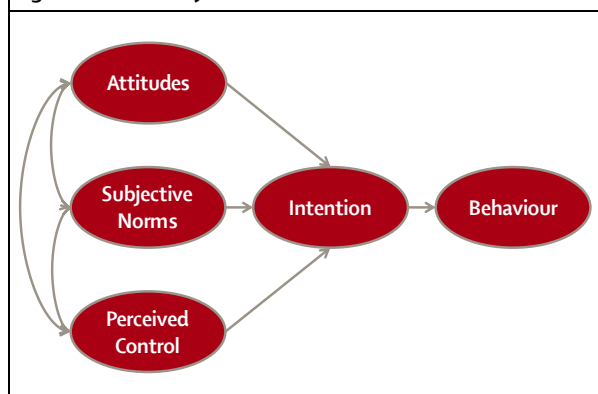
Source: Authors' representation, adapted from Ajzen 1991

Table 1: TPB implementation design methods

TPB component(s)	Implementation design method	Description	Example
Subjective norms	Role model	Providing an example from a social peer	A locally known influencer on YouTube promoting use of solar cookers
Subjective norms	Social comparison and encouragement	Providing feedback on how other people behave, praise or reward for performance of the behaviour (e.g., friends, relatives, superiors)	Giving individuals feedback about their level of physical exercise compared with a peer group
Attitudes	Information provision	Providing information and reasons to adopt a behaviour	Going door-to-door explaining the benefits of energy efficient light bulbs
Attitudes	Persuasion	Providing emotional appeals to adopt a behaviour	Addressing the concerns of parents about measles vaccinations in a workshop
Behavioural control	Enablement	Increasing means and reducing barriers to increase capability or opportunity	Making insect bed nets available in local stores
Behavioural control	Goal setting	Agreeing on long-term goals and having positive examples of what is achievable	Having people commit to attending four out of five worm treatments within a specific time frame

Source: Authors

that activity. Attitudes are based on beliefs about the likely positive and negative consequences of performing the behaviour and are mostly acquired through previous experience, knowledge or learning. Providing informative material that highlights the advantages of the intervention is a useful method to positively influence attitudes. The German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ), the German Development Institute (DIE) and two municipalities in Mozambique collaborated on a programme that used different messages in notification letters to increase property tax compliance. Initial evidence suggests that positively-framed letters, indicating the use and relevance of tax money, were especially effective among non-corporate and large taxpayers. In contrast, negatively-framed letters explaining legal consequences of noncompliance were particularly effective among enterprises.

Subjective norms, the social influences felt by the individual, are another important component of the TPB. Humans are a social species and we evaluate behaviour in reference to other people. Here, the assessments and expectations of our family, friends and colleagues as well as larger social groups and more distant people, such as experts in a field, play an important role. A person is more likely to show a behaviour if it is in line with existing norms and/or approved by important others. In Costa Rica, traditional methods like awareness campaigns had failed to motivate households to save water to overcome shortages. Researchers noticed that people were rarely aware of their own water consumption and lacked an understanding of adequate water usage volumes. A programme by the World Bank and ideas42, a behavioural insights consultancy, was set up in which people were motivated to save water by receiving feedback about their own volume of water consumption relative to their most thrifty neighbours.

Following the TPB, behavioural intentions are also driven by the **perceived control** over the behaviour. Perceived behavioural control refers to a person's beliefs about one's own ability to successfully perform a behaviour. An intervention can target

behavioural control by decreasing psychological or physical barriers to a behaviour. While many people understand the importance and benefits of waste separation, its compliance is still very low in most countries. Remembering the times of collection dates as well as the separation rules can be burdensome and challenging. DIE researchers in Argentina increased perceived control over this behaviour by providing information leaflets and magnetic calendars to communities that reminded recipients about the weekly collection of recyclables. The intervention succeeded in increasing waste separation of recyclables and a mid-term follow-up confirmed that the effect persisted six months after the intervention.

Table 1 shows a list of possible design methods that target components of the TPB. This list is not comprehensive; it is meant to illustrate some of the examples that are most promising for the development context. Targeting several TPB components at the same time can increase effectiveness.

Challenges of applying behavioural insights

While systematically considering behavioural aspects in development programmes increasingly excites policymakers and practitioners by promising a low-cost high-impact bargain, it is important to acknowledge that enhancing interventions with behavioural insights also has some limitations. Although the uptake of larger structural policies or the set-up of physical infrastructure also depend critically on human action, not all areas of development cooperation are equally inclined to integrate behavioural insights into their design and implementation. Programmes and policies that focus on the (change of) human behaviour (oftentimes in the field of technical development cooperation) are naturally closer to a behavioural lens.

Critics of behavioural approaches often note a paternalistic tendency when it comes to setting the right norms and behaviours within the design and implementation of programmes and policies. Development programmes are meant to influence others and lead to change. Designing programmes that consider more explicitly the individual are

an improvement. An inclusive process in dialogue with the targeted population and other stakeholders is hereby essential. Transparent behavioural design will increase ownership and long-term success.

Designing interventions in line with contextual factors in an adaptive process can lead to long-term behavioural changes and induce positive spillovers. Trial and error episodes are necessary in order to learn. Moreover, an adaptive process contributes to the identification, which is for instance key when designing results-based financing. If applied in a structured and constructive way, the TPB can largely add to a project's effectiveness.

Policy recommendations

Support of the development intervention by the targeted population is a prerequisite for a successful programme. But how can programmes ensure that the intervention is positively received by the population? What factors influence a person's behaviour towards the programme? Behavioural insights can help answer these questions and offer a different perspective by putting the individual into focus. Here, the TPB is a useful and easily applied framework for considering the main determinants that influence people's actions. Following this psychological theory, behaviour is influenced by three components: the individual's attitude towards the intervention, subjective norms (influenced by peers), and the individual's sense of behavioural control. Some programmes already intuitively take these factors into consideration before and during the implementation phase. To design and implement more successful interventions characterized by a more supportive behaviour of the target group the behavioural perspective should be systematically considered and supported. The questions shown in Box 1 provide a starting point.

Integrating the behavioural perspective into programmes requires a detailed understanding of the local context. The behavioural determinants should be assessed before implementation and the additional time should be accounted for in the overall planning of a programme.

Box 1: Simple questions as a TPB starting point	
Attitudes	Which attitudes does the target group have regarding - the desired target behaviour? - the intervention itself? - the involved actors (e.g., implementers)?
Subjective norms	What norms regarding current practices relevant to the target behaviour are prevalent among - the target group? - important others and peer groups (e.g., family, friends, neighbours)? - authorities (e.g., village elders, religious leaders)?
Perceived control	What beliefs does the target group have about - their physical capabilities (e.g., skills, means to act)? - their psychological and cognitive capabilities (e.g., understanding of "how to")? - the effectiveness of the target behaviour (e.g., individual impact on larger outcome)?
Source: Authors	

Collaboration and an intensive exchange with multiple stakeholders are recommended for the design of all programmes but are especially important when including behavioural aspects. During both the design phase and implementation, a close collaboration between actors who control different (local) contexts, such as governments, development institutions, NGOs, supermarkets, businesses, manufacturers and online platforms, is advisable. This helps to gain an understanding of prevailing attitudes, norms, perceived behavioural control and whether they are acted upon.

The consideration of the behavioural lens within programmes should be understood as an inclusive and iterative process. In order to promote a sustainable and ethical process, programme design and implementation should be in dialogue with local partners, in particular, the targeted population. This fosters empowerment and capacity building.

References

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