



Using behavioural insights to address complex development challenges

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Question

What is the (rigorous) evidence that a more sophisticated understanding of human behaviour (using behavioural insights) can help make better policy decisions and more effective programme design and delivery to address complex social and development challenges? What might be the barriers to using behavioural insights?

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The K4D helpdesk service provides brief summaries of current research, evidence, and lessons learned. Helpdesk reports are not rigorous or systematic reviews; they are intended to provide an introduction to the most important evidence related to a research question. They draw on a rapid desk-based review of published literature and consultation with subject specialists.

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1. Overview

Behavioural insights – the use of findings from behavioural economics, psychology and related fields – is a topic attracting interest in the international development community due to its potential to contribute to effective development solutions. This rapid review has looked at the literature on applying behavioural insights to interventions in lower income countries. Most experience with behavioural insights is from more economically developed contexts. In lower income countries, there are emerging experiences of development interventions applying behavioural insights, working on health and financial management outcomes, and to a lesser extent on education, childhood development and protecting the environment. Interventions in progress are also applying behavioural insights to reducing discrimination for refugee populations; reproductive health outcomes; and in humanitarian contexts. There is rigorous evidence of cases where applying behavioural insights has led to better diagnosis of problems and to better designed solutions. Challenges include: limited integration with other social and behaviour change approaches prevalent in development; a dispersed and small evidence base of small-scale randomised trials; how to move from narrow pilots to improving existing programmes that address big development problems; and securing funding. Recommendations include developing ethical principles/standards to guide implementation. Opportunities arise from the approach's central premise to embed innovation and rigorous experimentation and adaptation into the design of interventions.

Behavioural insights refers to the use of findings from behavioural science to understand how people behave in practice and draws on behavioural economics, psychology, and related fields (Hallsworth et al, 2016, p.10; World Bank, 2017; OECD, 2017a, p.3). Applying behavioural insights involves the inductive use of experiment and observation to identify patterns of behaviour and challenge established assumptions of rational behaviour (OECD, 2017a, p.16). Behaviour change interventions that apply behavioural insights tend to manipulate psychological or social factors involved in decision-making processes (Flanagan and Tanner, 2016, p.7).

This review offers a selective illustration of the range of evidence found on applying behavioural insights to development interventions in lower income countries. This rapid review has not explored the related literature on using behavioural insights for policy and programme interventions in more economically developed countries; there may be transferable learnings from those experiences. This review has looked for experiences from a range of contexts. It has looked for examples that involve personal individual decision-making, and that involve the behaviour of policy and programme officials within organisations. The review has focused on cases where behavioural insights have been used to address complex social and behavioural challenges involving the most marginalised. The review has looked for examples where behavioural insights have been used in combination with other approaches such as social and behaviour change communication (SBCC), social marketing and human centred design. It has looked across a range of sectors, with a focus on education, livelihoods, managing finances, empowerment, reducing discrimination and protecting the environment. The review has prioritised identifying evidence since (the WDR on *Mind, Society and Behaviour* in) 2015 but also includes older research where useful.

Key findings

Looking at the evidence available from lower income countries, this rapid review mainly came across cases using this approach to improve people's health outcomes and financial

management. Only a few cases were found for education and childhood development, livelihoods and protecting the environment. The review found several cases that involved working with public officials delivering services.

The review found a number of ongoing interventions applying behavioural insights, including cases working on issues such as reducing discrimination for refugee populations; reproductive health; and in humanitarian contexts. It was not able to find published evidence from lower income countries of the impact of behavioural insights explicitly being applied to interventions on reducing discrimination, empowerment; focusing on outcomes for people with disabilities; or working in conflict-affected areas.

The cases included in this review show there is rigorous evidence of where applying behavioural insights to development challenges has led to better diagnosis of problems and to better designed solutions. In some of the cases outcomes were not as good as expected (for various reasons); these are presented as learning experiences to inform future programme design.

This review has not found much published evidence of cases where a “behavioural insights” approach is explicitly documented as having been applied in combination with other behavioural change approaches such as SBCC, human-centred design and social marketing. At the same time, there are complementarities between different behaviour change approaches in development. This review includes some cases from the SBCC and social norm traditions which undertake formative research to understand behaviour; apply techniques that are identified within behavioural economics; embed adaptive testing; etc. These cases include working on health, empowerment and gender equality outcomes. There is scope for better integration of the different approaches to understanding behaviour and influencing behaviour change in the development field.

Other barriers and opportunities include:

- A dispersed and small evidence base of applying behavioural insights in poorer countries, predominantly consisting of small-scale randomised trials, with challenges including understanding when evidence is generalisable to different contexts.
- Opportunity to learn, generate evidence, and come up with better solutions afforded by embedding innovation and rigorous experimentation and adaptation in the design of interventions applying behavioural insights.
- With some ethical concerns over potential to abuse the use of behavioural insights to “control behaviour”, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recommends further development of guiding ethical principles/standards, capacity-building for public officials, and increased transparency (including of successful and failed experience, and actual costs involved) (OECD, 2017a, p.14).
- Mullainathan and Datta (2014) call for a move away from narrow, “boutique” pilots to a focus on existing programmes/projects addressing big development problems that are constrained by behaviours.
- Experts highlight challenges in securing funding for evaluative research applying behavioural insights that tends to require capacity that is expensive and (for now) mainly residing in the US and Western Europe. Another perceived issue is that the focus is often on easily quantified measures of success, rather than rigorous analysis determining the causal impact of interventions (Sugg, 2016).

2. What are behavioural insights?

There is an expectation that “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” (Shankar and Foster, 2016, p.3). Consequently development organisations are increasingly seeking to design people-centred policies and programmes that incorporate findings on how people make everyday decisions¹, using a more sophisticated understanding of the social and psychological “underpinnings” of human behaviour (Kumpf and Foster, 2017; World Bank, 2015, p.2).

Behavioural insights refer to the “use of findings from behavioural science to understand how people behave in practice”, drawing on scientific findings from behavioural economics, cognitive science and psychology and methods from experimental psychology (Hallsworth et al, 2016, p.10; World Bank, 2017; OECD, 2017a, p.3). Applying behavioural insights involves the inductive use of experiment and observation to identify patterns of behaviour, challenge established assumptions of rational behaviour, and use the findings to inform policies (OECD, 2017a, p.16).

Flanagan and Tanner (2016, p.7) highlight that behavioural insights has focussed on addressing “cognitive idiosyncrasies such as loss aversion, procrastination, and confirmation bias that prevent people from optimizing”. They explain that behaviour change interventions that apply behavioural insights tend to manipulate psychological or social factors involved in decision-making processes. This can involve “setting defaults, simplifying information, emphasizing social norms, leveraging interpersonal interactions and social support or pressure, and so forth” (Flanagan and Tanner, 2016, p.8). An OECD event on behavioural insights in 2017 found that while behavioural insights initially focussed on individual or micro-level “nudges”, this approach “has evolved to encompass wider behavioural social science disciplines in public policy” (OECD, 2017b, p.6).²

Distinguishing between behaviour change approaches applied to development challenges

There are a number of different approaches to understanding behaviour and influencing behaviour change in the development field, and experts highlight the challenges stemming from a lack of integration between approaches with overlapping theories and techniques³ (Flanagan and Tanner, 2016, p.8). In particular there are ongoing discussions on the potential to understand better the complementarities (and distinctions) between older SBCC approaches to tackling development challenges, and insights from BE or behavioural science, a recent ‘hot’ topic in development (Sugg & Senthilingam, 2014; ⁴). Both draw on social norm theory but while

¹ <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/blog/2017/5/9/Better-understanding-of-human-behaviour-can-help-achieve-the-global-development-agenda.html>

² Several frameworks and approaches have been developed to guide the application of behavioural insights to policy and programmes. Among the most prominent are; the Behavioural Insights Team’s Easy, Attractive, Social and Timely (EAST) framework (Service et al, 2014); the Behaviour Change Wheel (Mitchie et al, 2011); and Behaviour Centred Design (Aunger and Curtis, 2016).

³ This issue is compounded by the “vast” theoretical literature on understanding human behaviour in myriad disciplines with limited cross-disciplinary learning and integration, including neuroscience, cognitive science, psychology, behavioural economics, sociology, political science and anthropology, marketing and design (Shankar and Foster, 2016, p.2; World Bank, 2015, p.2; Neal et al, 2016, p.2; Aunger and Curtis, 2017).

⁴ This is an issue that will be discussed at a SBCC Summit in 2018 (a key organiser is BBC Media Action) <http://sbccsummit.org>

BE looks at how people make decisions and how to align decision-making with existing values, SBCC seeks to change individual and community-level behaviour by influencing attitudes and social norms through multi—faceted communication approaches (Guichon, 2016; Ashton et al, 2016, p.11). While often similar or (at least) complementary approaches, SBCC and BE in implementation tend to be siloed⁵. There is a similar discussion to be had on the complementarity of SBCC and BE with other, growing, fields such as human-centred design (HCD)⁶, adaptive management (AM) and doing development differently (DDD) approaches⁷.

3. Case studies – evidence of impact

A variety of resources compile case studies on interventions that have applied behavioural insights in development interventions in low and middle income countries, and their results. Examples include:

- Bryan et al (2017) provides a list of behavioural strategies to enhance the effectiveness of development programs and policies, organised by recommended policy strategy and the psychological phenomenon being addressed (see especially p.88).
- OECD (2017) (and partners) present 129 cases from 14 countries across the world. Case studies include financial products, energy, environment, health and safety, tax, public service delivery and more.⁸ Only a few of the cases are from lower income countries.
- An online Behavioral Evidence Hub⁹ has been launched by ideas42, Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), and the Center for Health Incentives and Behavioral Economics (CHIBE) at the University of Pennsylvania. B-hub is a curated collection of evidence-based, behaviourally-informed innovations.
- The online database of research by Innovations for Poverty Action is searchable for the tag “behavioural design”¹⁰.
- The World Bank’s 2015 World Development Report presents examples of behavioural insights used in international development organised by the three principles of human decision-making: thinking 1) automatically, 2) socially, and 3) with mental models (World Bank, 2015).
- Hallsworth et al’s (2016) report of the WISH Behavioral Insights Forum 2016 provides summaries of cases applying behavioural insights to improve health outcomes, including some experiences from lower income countries.
- Ashton et al (2015) illustrate how a behavioural economics tool could be translated into the reproductive health context. They also summarise evidence on the application of behavioural insights in poor and middle income countries across a range of sectors.

⁵ SBCC Summit 2018 conference objectives. <http://sbccsummit.org/about-the-2018-summit-2/conference-objectives/>

⁶ Tania (2017) elucidates on the interaction between behavioural science and HCD.

⁷ SBCC Summit 2018 conference objectives. <http://sbccsummit.org/about-the-2018-summit-2/conference-objectives/>

⁸ <http://oecdinsights.org/2017/03/07/irrational-me-behavioural-economics-hits-its-stride/>

⁹ <http://www.bhub.org/>

¹⁰ <https://www.poverty-action.org/topics/behavioral-design>

- A K4D Helpdesk Report on “Behavioural economics/insights and health and nutrition in low- and middle-income countries” provides examples from the body of evidence on the application of behavioural economics in health interventions in poorer countries (Rohwerder, 2017).

From the above resources and others, here is an illustrative selection of the evidence on the results on applying behavioural insights to development challenges found by this review.

Health

Applying behavioural insights to improve uptake of post-abortion family planning in Nepal (*Sunaulo Parivar Nepal (SPN)/Marie Stopes Nepal (MSN), ideas42, and Marie Stopes International*)

At SPN/MSN – one of Nepal’s largest nongovernmental sexual and reproductive health service providers – uptake of long acting reversible contraceptive (LARCs) among post-abortion clients was low (Gartoulla et al, 2017). The project sought to use behavioural insights to inform understanding of the problem and design an intervention to increase uptake of LARCs among women post abortion. A peer-comparison intervention gave service providers feedback on how post-abortion family planning LARC uptake at their centre compared with other centres. The idea was this would persuade the service providers to increase effort related to counselling. Between July 2016 and January 2017 a randomised controlled trial (RCT) was undertaken in 36 centres in 32 rural and urban districts (of 75 total) in Nepal. The intervention succeeded in increasing LARC uptake among post-abortion clients by 7.9 percentage points. Gartoulla et al (2017) conclude that “This intervention is beneficial for addressing barriers to achieve desired outcomes”.

Multiple behaviour change intervention for diarrhoea control in Lusaka (*London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Centre for Infectious Disease Research in Zambia, Lusaka, Zambia*)

The study aimed to assess the effect of a novel behaviour change intervention using emotional drivers on caregiver practice of behaviours to prevent and control diarrhoea. Funders were Absolute Return for Kids (ARK) and Comic Relief. In 2014 a cluster RCT in Lusaka Province tested the effect of a campaign called ‘Komboni housewives’ which included clinic events, community events, and radio messaging. Campaign development followed the Behaviour Centred Design (BCD) approach, and the decision was made to build the campaign around the motive of affiliation: the drive to become an accepted member of a given social group. The intervention improved exclusive breastfeeding (self-reporting), but effects were diluted in clusters with low exposure. The researchers conclude that “Complex caregiver practices can improve through interventions built around human motives, but these must be implemented more intensely” (Greenland et al, 2016, p.e996).

Education and childhood development

Smoothing the Cost of Education: Primary School Saving in Uganda (*Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), Private Education Development Network (PEDN) and FINCA Uganda*)

In Uganda, a RCT explored whether a school-based savings program improved academic performance and reduced dropout rates by enabling students and their families to save for

school-related expenses. Researchers partnered with the Private Education Development Network (PEDN) and FINCA Uganda to implement and test the “Super Savers” program in public primary schools (136 schools in total, including the control group). When savings were labelled for educational purposes, rather than fully committed educational expenses, the RCT found an increase in the amount students saved, expenditures on educational supplies, and test scores.¹¹ (Karlan and Linden, 2014).

Improving after school programmes in South Africa (*Western Cape Government, ideas42 and the University of Cape Town*)

In 2010, the Western Cape Government (WCG) created the “Mass participation; Opportunity and access; Development and growth” (MOD) programme as an after school programme aimed at creating a socially inclusive, creative and active Western Cape. The MOD Centres – currently 181 across the province with 500 coaches and 40,000 registered participants – act as a hub for sport, recreation, arts and culture activities for learners in the community. In 2012 WCG worked with ideas42 and the University of Cape Town to initiate a series of behavioural change pilot projects aimed at investigating whether behavioural nudges could enhance policy implementation and delivery. The behavioural pilot was shown to have positive effects on learner attendance, increasing daily attendance rates within the treatment schools, and bringing more learners into the MOD programme. The treatment schools in the post intervention period were estimated to have on average 25.6 more students attending per day, or a 39% increase over the control population. There was no appreciable change in the frequency with which learners participated in the programme however (OECD, 2017, p.96-101).

Childhood development support to Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon (*Behavioural Insights Team and the International Rescue Committee (IRC)*)

Behavioural Insight Team¹² (BIT) in partnership with the IRC delivered childhood development support in refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon. Through a RCT they tested message frames for bringing early childhood development content to displaced Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon. Using a mass Short Message Service (SMS) platform, a series of messages were sent to Syrian parents and caregivers of preschool-aged children, directing them to interactive videos. Two frames were used: a ‘science’ one which emphasised the clinical benefits to children, and a ‘parent’ frame that highlighted parents and children would have fun engaging with the videos. BIT found “the science framing was the most effective for the Syrian refugee population, driving higher engagement” (Information from Behavioural Insights Team, 2017, p.40-41; see Wilton et al 2017, p.16-18 for more detailed summary of the results of the RCT).

Livelihoods and managing finances

Providing timely useful financial management advice at scale in India (*Ideas42, IFMR - LEAD and Janalakshmi*)

¹¹ <https://www.poverty-action.org/study/smoothing-cost-education-primary-school-saving-uganda>

¹² <http://www.behaviouralinsights.co.uk/>

Researchers tested a low-cost financial capability intervention delivering “easy-to-remember and easy-to-adopt” simplified financial lessons via voice mobile phone messages to Indian microentrepreneurs. Researchers conducted a year-long randomized evaluation among 2,391 microentrepreneurs with business loans at Janalakshmi. Preliminary analysis of the evaluation results did not find a significant impact of the training program on microentrepreneurs’ business practices, business sales, or profitability overall. One reason may be that listenership was low; “more engaged participants, who listened to more than half of the total message content, did increase monthly business sales and were less likely to withdraw cash from their businesses for personal use, relative to the average for the entire comparison group”.¹³

Nudging Farmers to Use Fertiliser – Experimental Evidence from Kenya (Investing in Children and their Societies (ICS), John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation)

In collaboration with the NGO International Child Support (ICS), researchers designed an intervention to test if providing mechanisms to save harvest income for future fertilizer purchase could be effective in increasing usage. An ICS officer visited farmers immediately after the harvest, offering to sell them a voucher for fertilizer with free delivery later in the season. The programme increased usage by 14 percentage points in the first season and by 18 percentage points in the second. The researchers found that “these effects are comparable to those obtained from a 50% price subsidy”.¹⁴

Protecting the environment

Applying behavioural economics to water use Belen, Costa Rica (Ideas42 and World Bank)

A RCT evaluated behavioural interventions to decrease water consumption in Belen, Costa Rica. Of three interventions used, two were found to decrease water consumption significantly in the months following the intervention: “A descriptive social norm intervention using neighborhood comparisons reduces consumption by between 3.7 and 5.6 percent relative to a control group, while a plan-making intervention reduces consumption by between 3.4 and 5.5 percent”. There were different effects on different subpopulations: “the plan-making intervention being most effective for low-consumption households, while the neighborhood comparison intervention is most effective for high-consumption households”. The results demonstrate that behavioural interventions can be effectively implemented by local governments in resource-constrained contexts, and that “raising awareness about how much water an individual consumes, and comparing this consumption level with peers, can go a long way in helping change individuals’ behavior regarding the use of a finite resource such as water”. (Datta et al, 2015, abstract)

Other cases

To show the range of evidence found, this review includes examples of cases that do not explicitly label their approach as incorporating insights from behavioural economics, but have some commonalities in their approach (for example in use of formative research and a process of

¹³ <https://www.poverty-action.org/study/rules-thumb-providing-timely-useful-financial-management-advice-scale>

¹⁴ <https://www.poverty-action.org/study/nudging-farmers-use-fertilizer-experimental-evidence-kenya>

testing and adaptation; working with social norms; using techniques identified by behavioural science).

Population Council: use of incentives and commitments to increase girls' age at marriage.

“The Council’s Berhane Hewan program in Ethiopia was one of the first rigorously evaluated projects with the explicit objective of increasing the age at marriage. It took a multi-faceted approach—engaging girls, their families, and their communities—to building adolescent girls’ social, health, and economic assets and reducing their vulnerability.”¹⁵ Ashton et al (2015) highlight the programme’s use of behavioural economic tools of incentives and commitments. Behavioural science explains that it is possible to harness social pressure by creating “social commitments” – public statements of intention, which leverage social sanctions to reinforce follow-through on a decision. According to Ashton et al (2015, p.30) the Berhane Hewan programme is a rare example of the application of these insights to girls’ empowerment and reproductive health (albeit that “behavioural insights” is not an approach or terminology used in the programme reports scanned). The programme involved a public commitment by parents and their daughters to delay marriage for at least the duration of the two-year programme, and families were also told they would receive a goat on successful completion (Ashton et al, 2015, p. 30). A quasi-experimental evaluation of the programme found that it delayed marriage among 10-14 year olds and increased the use of family planning services among sexually active and married adolescents (15-19 year olds) (Ashton et al, 2015, p. 30).

Voice for Change programme to transform gender norms in Nigeria (UK Aid)

“Voices for Change (V4C) is a £29 million programme funded by UK Aid, working to strengthen the enabling environment for gender equality in Nigeria. The programme targets young women and men aged 16–25 years old. It operates in four states in Nigeria: Enugu, Kaduna, Kano and Lagos and for some activities, at federal level. V4C is a unique example of a programme applying social norms theory at scale and is addressing the structural barriers to gender equality, in particular, discriminatory and harmful attitudes, behaviours and social norms” (Voices4Change, 2017, p.12). It “is distinct from many other programmes aiming to transform gender norms in placing communications and social marketing at its heart. Whilst these approaches are common in public health, they are less common in gender programmes” (p.1). The programme reports that integrating social marketing approaches has been key to the success of V4C in creating a brand which young Nigerians find appealing, creating awareness of, and engagement in, the campaign on a mass scale, and shifting attitudes towards gender equality among hundreds of thousands of young Nigerians. The entry point of the programme was to use qualitative research to understand the attitudes of the target audience towards gender roles and equality, and barriers to adopting more equal behaviour (Voice4Change, 2017, p.1-2).

Improving maternal and newborn health in Bangladesh through exposure to television programmes (BBC Media Action)

BBC Media Action has undertaken a RCT of the short-term effects of exposure to the two different health-focused television programmes – a drama and a discussion show – in Bangladesh. Both programmes were based on formative research – including Structural

¹⁵ <http://www.popcouncil.org/research/building-an-evidence-base-to-delay-marriage-in-sub-saharan-africa>

Equation Modelling that highlighted the importance of norms and discussion in influencing antenatal care behaviours, pre-testing (drama only), and health communication theory and practice. The RCT showed that watching the drama or drama and discussion show increased health knowledge, while watching both programmes increased the intent to practise health behaviours more than the drama alone. While the RCT does not track the programmes' longer-term effects on these two outcomes, it has clearly demonstrated the power of interventions with multiple communication strands (Godfrey, 2017).

Ongoing interventions

This review came across a number of development interventions using behavioural insights that have started recently, which do not yet have evidence of results. There appear to be a substantial number of interventions under way, across a wide range of contexts, and tackling diverse complex development challenges. Organisations investing in these interventions include the World Bank, the UN, UK's Department for International Development, and the Gates Foundation, among others. Here are some examples of ongoing interventions:

Preventing discrimination

UNDP and WFP (in partnership with Jordan's Business Development Centre and others) have launched a programme using behavioural insights to tackle discrimination and unrest stemming from host communities perceiving refugees are taking "their" jobs. Using "Skills Exchange" activities, the objective is for Jordanians to see how Syrian refugees contribute to their community (Shankar and Foster, 2016, p.6).

Ending child marriage

The UN Behavioural Initiative (UNBI) is working with UNICEF and UNFPA to identify strategic entry points for their Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage to engage and change parents' and community members' beliefs and attitudes about child marriage. A USD 246 million programme with an initial focus on 12 countries in South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, it focuses on enabling girls at risk of child marriage to choose their own futures. Insights such as the characteristics of the messenger being important has led to a focus on engaging religious leaders – and in particular those already against child marriage – as "positive deviants" (Shankar and Foster, 2016, p.5-6).

Reproductive health

A national campaign on family planning in Nepal by the Health Communication Capacity Collaborative (HC3)¹⁶ and Nepal's Ministry of Health and Population (MOHP) used SBCC and behaviour economics. HC3 used research and pretesting to identify motivations driving fertility management behaviour in young couples. The campaign made the choice and use of contraception *easier* for young couples – applying the behavioural economics principle that "choices that require less deliberation have a "lower cognitive cost" and people are more likely to make them". In the campaign, priming, heuristics (mental shortcuts used to make decisions) and

¹⁶ USAID flagship SBCC programme.

reminders reduced the cognitive cost of choosing family planning methods. Final results of the impact on family planning use will be made available (Jacoby, 2017).

DFID is funding a programme in Somalia to influence the uptake of services and key behaviours around reproductive health (family planning and antenatal care) and nutrition. Using a human centred design approach – working with PSI and the design consultancy ThinkPlace – the design work is grounded in a number of assessments, one of which looked at behavioural insights. Identified challenges include finding the assessment expertise in country compounded by security issues, and adapting the design participation methodology to suit the context (e.g. preference for oral over written communication, tendency to defer to health professionals, among others). Further design testing and refining is planned.¹⁷

Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Children’s Investment Fund Foundation, Population Services International (PSI), the Adolescents 360¹⁸ programme launched early 2016 aims to increase voluntary, modern contraceptive use and reduce unintended pregnancy among adolescent girls (15-19 years old) in Ethiopia, Nigeria and Tanzania. This four year USD 30 million programme aims to catalyse a new approach to designing adolescent sexual and reproductive health programs at scale, using a developmentally and anthropologically informed user-centred design¹⁹. The process evaluation by ITAD (2017) identifies that “Heavy investment in planning and coordination over different geographies and time zones culminated in an insight generation process that clearly engaged country teams, young people and the wider consortium, but may not be characterized as full “co-creation” as envisaged in the theory underpinning A360”. There are some concerns about the depth of the insights: proof of concept will be in the extent to which these can be translated into innovative design opportunities. Furthermore the insights generated during the inspiration phase show the importance of engaging government and partners to address structural drivers (ITAD, 2017).

In humanitarian context

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC) Air-Bel Center partnered with the Behavioural Insights Team to apply the EAST framework to previous research on the violence children experience in crisis-affected communities in Iraq and Tanzania** and the surrounding social norms. Air-Bel and BIT developed proposals of simple, low-cost ways to potentially reduce violence that draw on behavioural approaches — “like sending SMS reminders to teachers with suggestions for non-violent punishment, combining non-violent discipline trainings with public pledges from religious leaders, or targeting bystander behaviour”. The next step is to refine the ideas with implementing personnel, develop pilots and test them.²⁰

¹⁷ DFID communication.

¹⁸ <https://www.a360learninghub.org/>

¹⁹ <http://developingadolescent.berkeley.edu/research/adolescents-360>

²⁰ <https://medium.com/air-bel/applying-behavioral-science-in-humanitarian-settings-to-reduce-violence-f3ee27ff3ac6>

4. Barriers and opportunities

Evidence challenges and opportunities

There is a disparate literature on experiences of applying behavioural insights, not yet readily available in one place; initiatives such as the ideas42 Behavioral Evidence Hub²¹ aim to bridge this gap (Tantia, 2017). Moreover the evidence base for behavioural economics in low- and-middle income countries predominately consists of small-scale RCTs, with as yet few policy interventions or scaled approaches applying behavioural economics principles (Rohwerder, 2017, citing Luoto, 2017, p.159). Development practitioners do not yet understand when evidence from one context is generalisable to others²², while policies using behavioural insights have mainly been to date from developed countries (Aliana et al, 2017, p.43-44). In addition there is a need to understand what adjustments are needed to apply behavioural insights in resource-constrained environments, and the implications of this for interpreting results²³.

The literature highlights the opportunity afforded by the central principle of a behavioural insights approach to embed impact testing into programme designs. Using rigorous randomised evaluations “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” (Shankar and Foster, 2016, p.4). Mullainathan and Datta (2014, p.32-33) recommend embedding innovation, by designing (possibly several) interventions with an iterative experimentation process as part of the design itself. This will enable identification of unintended consequences, better solutions and diagnoses and diagnostic techniques relevant for other contexts (Mullainathan and Datta, 2014).

A form of RCTs – rapid or nimble RCTs, and rapid prototype / A/B testing – have evolved – pioneered by ideas42 and Innovations for Poverty Action (Narasimhan and Arun, 2017). These cheaper and quicker RCTs use “secondary data sources to test achievement of specific targets and incorporate changes to devise an intervention which is a better fit for the research and policy question at hand” (Narasimhan and Arun, 2017; see also Karlan, 2017 for a methodological presentation of nimble RCTs).

There is some discussion within the SBCC community of practice in international development over the focus on RCTs. Some find that “while suitable for measuring the impact of some types of interventions, too much emphasis may have been placed on the RCT being the gold standard for demonstrating the efficacy of behavioural interventions” (Sugg and Senthilingam, 2014, p.20).

Scaling up

Mullainathan and Datta (2014, p.32-33) call for “some deep-seated changes” to how behavioural insights are applied in development. They call for a move away from narrow, “boutique” pilots to a focus on existing programmes/projects addressing big development problems that are

²¹ <http://www.bhub.org/>

²² <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2015/05/19/bringing-behavioral-economics-to-development/>

²³ <http://economicpsychologypolicy.blogspot.co.uk/2015/06/behavioural-insights-in-international.html>

constrained by behaviours. For donors this means working with governments or large aid agencies and/or private-sector players with established distribution and outreach networks.

Transparency and accountability

In 2015 the OECD found that “there are clear ethical issues when using psychology to affect behaviour (and a big mistake could trigger a backlash against the use of behavioural science generally)” (OECD, 2015, p.10). In 2017 OECD (2017, p.3) concluded that ethical concerns are not perceived as significant barriers for the use of behavioural insights within public bodies, with ethical principles – pertaining to the public interest and the preservation of choice – integrated into behaviourally informed approaches in a number of countries. It recommends the further development of guiding principles/standards to ensure the use of behavioural insights by public bodies is not open to abuse. Other recommendations include 1) developing public officials’ capacity to apply behavioural insights and 2) publishing successful and unsuccessful trials and the actual costs (compared against the benefits) of applying behavioural insights (OECD, 2017).

Funding

In a Media Action policy briefing, Sugg (2016) highlights the limited investment in rigorous evaluative research in the health communications field. Moreover the focus is often on numbers and easily quantified measures of success, “rather than the kind of rigorous analysis that would conclusively determine the causal impact of interventions” (Sugg, 2016, p.21).

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