



The power of a nudge

Posted at: 25/09/2018

Highlights

- According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 202 institutions around the world are applying behavioural insights to public policy.
- While most of them are found in the U.S., the U.K., Europe and Australia, some are found in developing countries in West Asia, Africa and Latin America.
- These institutions partner with behavioural and social scientists and combine psychology, sociology, anthropology, and politics to understand human behaviour to design effective public policies.

Understanding a paradox

- Why are governments including behavioural science in policymaking?
- Over the last few years, it has been observed that even the most well-intentioned public policy programmes fail to be adopted by people who would benefit from them the most.
- On the contrary, people repeatedly make decisions that serve neither their own interests nor of others.
- In India, for instance, despite access to toilets, open defecation remains a huge challenge.
- Finding answers to this paradox is where behavioural frameworks become relevant.
- People's choices and decisions are not rational but determined by a far more complex set of psychological, cognitive and behavioural factors.
- Given their limited attention and computational capacity, people gravitate towards the status quo, which often results in a gap between the policy's intent and action.
- It's therefore not surprising that people discount the risk of stroke and "choose" not to invest in health insurance.
- Decisions also tend to be clouded because of societal perceptions and adherence to norms — for instance, girls are still married young.
- Understanding these barriers is leading to recalibration of public policy design.
- By including 'nudges' — small, easy and timely suggestions to influence behaviour — we understand implementation outcomes better.
- One, the advantages of deploying these insights can only be reaped if national contexts and differences in socio-economic, cultural and political narratives are appreciated.
- So, while success stories from across the world showcase the potential of informed behavioural adjustments to policies, these can't be simply emulated in developing countries.
- There first needs to be an analysis of social norms.

Improving health services

- Second, behavioural science can be applied to large-scale programmes.
- The very nature of the science being imbued in a social and cultural context enables it to generate effective and sustained results to public service programmes.
- PENN SoNG is collating the analyses of core social motivators for open defecation and related behaviours in Tamil Nadu and Bihar with culturally appropriate social measures to convert toilet usage into a sustained habit.
- Third, interventions that are designed using this science can reduce the intent-to-action gap.
- There is a plethora of tools like defaults, reminders, prompts, and incentives that can reduce poor adherence and increase compliance for sustained impact throughout the life of an intervention — for example, Kilkari, a mobile service by the government that delivers free, weekly and time-appropriate audio messages about pregnancy, childbirth and childcare directly to families' mobile phones.
- It focuses on improving uptake of health services.
- Lastly, data collected and evaluated from a behavioural insights approach can be used for better management of programme performances.
- The impressive work done by the Ministry of Rural Development, on monitoring the implementation of national flagship schemes through DISHA dashboards, can be leveraged for evaluating behavioural change on the ground.
- While DISHA does not include measures on behaviour, it measures implementation of programmes.
- It shows how India can benefit from the use of behavioural insights in policy decision-making.

The Hindu

