



DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION TIPS TOOLS INSIGHTS PRACTICES

In practice

BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE IN DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION: THE UNITED KINGDOM'S APPROACH

Key messages

Achieving the 2030 Agenda will require institutions, systems and human behaviour to change on a massive scale. The United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) intends to build on its established culture of innovation by institutionalising the use of science, economic insight and data-led decision making to improve development outcomes across programmes and initiatives. Key to this is the Behavioural Science approach, which by improving understanding of behaviour, offers policymakers a coherent, evidence-led toolset for designing, testing, and scaling behaviourally informed strategies and interventions.

Keywords

[Development awareness](#) | [Evaluation systems](#) | [Innovation](#) | [Institutional arrangement](#) | [Learning and knowledge management](#)

Key partner

[United Kingdom](#)

Challenge

Human behaviour, institutions and systems must change on a massive scale if we are to achieve the ambitious 2030 Agenda. But changing human behaviour is complex. Since 2000, approaches from the behavioural and social sciences had been adopted piecemeal by UK agencies across government, culminating in the establishment of the first Behavioural Insights (BI) Unit at the Cabinet Office in 2009.

These efforts inspired the adaptation of behaviourally informed experimental work in international development, particularly at the UK Department for International Development (DFID). Influenced by the World Bank's 2015 [Mind, Society and Behavior report](#), DFID recognised that cognitive constraints, social norms and mental models significantly influence decision making by stakeholders, implementers and development practitioners.

In 2021, DFID merged with the Foreign Office to form FCDO, which continued to [invest in behavioural capacities](#). However, while behaviourally informed approaches were being used by parts of the organisation, they were not yet fully adopted across the FCDO.

Approach

FCDO has adopted a five-pronged approach to institutionalise behaviourally informed approaches:

- **A clear mandate:** Support from senior leaders, and resources for dedicated behavioural science experts (plus technical and scientific expertise, and strategic planning and management expertise), have ensured behavioural science informs FCDO's programme and policy work.
- **A culture of learning:** To foster a culture of learning, experimentation and trust-building, FCDO introduced the [Methods, Mechanisms and Mindsets approach](#) to "reframe risk" and incentivise iterative and adaptive ways of working. Adaptive management allows FCDO to better learn and adapt during programme implementation, while documenting the advantages of adaptive and experimental approaches.
- **Context:** Adjusting internal rules, regulations and procurement processes for adaptive management has allowed behavioural science to underpin key organisational priorities and approaches.
- **Collaboration:** To promote behavioural science within the organisation and beyond, FCDO partnered with the World Bank and United Nations Innovation Network, and with UK government departments such as the Government Communication Service International (GCSI) in the Cabinet Office and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC). Internally, FCDO innovation and health networks set up the [COVID-19 Behaviour Change Forum](#) to enable FCDO experts from headquarters and country offices to exchange lessons on appropriate and behaviourally informed local responses to COVID-19 with implementors, private sector partners and academics.
- **Capacity:** FCDO has developed a framework for assessing capabilities, including behavioural science, across four levels: awareness, foundation, practitioner and expert. FCDO has also invested in developing the behavioural science capacity of external partners, for example [through the Global Innovation Fund](#) and the [COVID-19 Hygiene Hub](#).

Results

- **Behavioural expertise established within the governments of Indonesia, Guatemala and Bangladesh**, through support from the [Behavioural Insights Team \(BIT\)](#) and [Global Innovation Fund](#).
- **A behaviourally-informed government-led national sanitation campaign in rural United Republic of Tanzania** (hereafter 'Tanzania'), developed through a formative, UKAid-funded [research project](#) which provided considerable insight into sanitation behaviours and informed creative intervention design.
- **Behavioural enhancements to [cash transfer programmes](#) in Kenya, Ghana and Tanzania**, developed and tested jointly with Ideas42 and the [Global Innovation Fund](#) and the countries' social protection agencies. Lab-in-the field evaluations indicate a 7-percentage point (pp) and 3pp increase in intention to invest and an 8pp and 5pp increase in savings in Kenya and Tanzania respectively.
- **A Behaviour Change Forum** created during the COVID-19 pandemic by FCDO experts, which brings together a wide range of stakeholders from within and outside government to support priority development challenges with multi-disciplinary peer learning, evidence sharing and connections.
- **An internal community of practice on behavioural science** nurtured by the offices of the FCDO's Chief Economist and Chief Scientist, as well as several internal staff development and external events.

Lessons learnt

- **Leveraging the social and political climate helped facilitate institutionalisation:** FCDO has taken advantage of current trends and windows of opportunities both within and outside the agency, including the World Bank's 2015 report and the UK cross-governmental drive to adopt behavioural science.
- **A realistic vision of institutionalising behavioural science can counter senior management attraction to “the next big thing”.** DFID colleagues emphasised the need to not only invest in a range of behaviourally informed initiatives in partner countries, but also in multi-year efforts that target internal change and capacity building.
- **Reframing behavioural science in light of FCDO's strategic priorities** can demystify and make behavioural science more acceptable to staff. FCDO highlighted its complementarity with the long-standing commitment to being adaptive and evidence-based, and in making future investments based on rigorous research into what really works.

Further information

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OECD resources

OECD, “Innovation”, *Development Co-operation Fundamentals*, <https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=10991099393-arb0p1y205&title=Innovation>.

To learn more about the United Kingdom's development co-operation see:

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See more *In Practice* examples from the United Kingdom here: <https://www.oecd.org/development-cooperation-learning?tag-key+partner=united+kingdom&submodel=in+practice#search>.

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