Behavioural Science | Guidance Note

Secretary-General's Guidance on Behavioural Science

01 | Introduction

For the United Nations to remain a trusted global leader in the 21st century and to perform functions well, we must embrace and apply innovative approaches to our operations and administration.

Behavioural science refers to an evidence-based understanding of how people actually behave, make decisions and respond to programmes, policies, and incentives. It uses rigorous methods to provide an understanding of impact and of what interventions work. The practice includes, for example, presenting choices to help people achieve their aims and make informed decisions; and reducing friction (such as paperwork requirements and administrative burdens) that separates people from something that they want.

The UN cannot maintain a business as usual approach if it wants to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and deliver on our mandates across all pillars. Behavioural science is part of a wider methodological and practical transformation process that includes data, digital transformation, innovation, and strategic foresight to ensure that the UN applies the best tools to confront contemporary and future challenges.

In many areas, the delivery of our mandates is linked to changing human behaviour, such as taking medicine, allowing a child to attend school, halting violence, reducing stigma, reaching agreements, or saving money. Behavioural science enables us to diagnose barriers preventing people from adopting a certain behaviour, understand enablers that help people achieve their aims, and design and measure the impact of interventions on the basis of these assessments and the premise of ethical choice and transparency all premised on commitments to human dignity, transparency and respect for ethical requirements.

Behavioural science is increasingly in use across Governments and the private sector. In the UN system, interventions leveraging behavioural science are being piloted and applied at the country level and at Headquarters, with early evidence showing clear impact. These successes suggest that there is tremendous potential for impact if this approach can be widely used and mainstreamed across the United Nations. Examples of behavioural science projects in the UN system and across the public sector are available for reference in the Annex of this Guidance Note.

02 | Purpose

The purpose of this Guidance Note is to introduce the practice of behavioural science as a means to enhancing the United Nations' mandate delivery and programme implementation as well as improving administration, such as through simplifying and reducing unnecessary bureaucratic processes and fostering a work culture of collaboration.

03 | Opportunities for the Implementation of Behavioural Science

Behavioural science can be applied to the policy and programmatic focus areas of the UN, including, but not limited to ongoing work in gender, education, environment and health, and also contribute to improving internal processes, interagency coordination, UN reform, management and administration.

UN entities are encouraged to apply behavioural science throughout the entire process of policy-making and programming to achieve greater effectiveness and efficiency. It is recommended that this approach be applied, including in the following contexts:

- **Designing new and improving existing policies and programmes** using a behavioural perspective to facilitate or encourage stakeholders to achieve desired outcomes;

- **Presenting information** in a behaviourally-informed way to promote clarity, awareness and action;

- **Structuring and presenting choices** in an evidence-based manner that reduces the impact of behavioural biases and barriers and enables people to make informed decisions;

- **Fostering existing or emerging positive social norms**, where doing so would promote the SDGs;

- **Combining behavioural and data sciences** to understand and predict outcomes and better evaluate impact, mindful of the existence of different challenges in distinct areas of the UN's work;

- **Incorporating behavioural science methodologies** in reviews of programmes and operations (e.g. strategic and functional reviews); and

- Incorporating an understanding of decision making, behaviour change and human-centred design into the **development of digital products**.

UN entities are encouraged to apply behavioural science to their underlying administrative support systems, policies and processes, including:

- **Identifying and realising reductions in existing administrative burdens**, costs and barriers to access, and increasing use of programmes implemented by the UN, including through process improvement, simplification and elimination of overly complex or no-value processes (for example, by conducting sludge audits);

- **Redesigning inefficient and ineffective processes** in UN management, administration and the provision of support services;

- **Reducing manual paperwork requirements** and response times to the extent appropriate, with greater reliance on automation and better leveraging the benefits of ICT systems and applications; and

- **Incentivising innovative, analytical, evidence-based approaches** to business process improvement.

04 Implementation of the Behavioural Science Guidance Note

UN entities are encouraged to:

Identify policies, programmes and practices where behavioural science may significantly enhance mandate delivery and accelerate progress towards the SDGs, as well as to allocate resources accordingly;

Link behavioural science practices to ongoing institutional efforts and work toward mainstreaming the approach;

Create and strengthen strategies for applying behavioural science, incorporating an understanding of ethics, and using rigorous testing and evaluating impact;

Strengthen internal capacity to understand what behavioural science is and how it can be applied through training, workshops and learning by doing; and

Enhance partnerships with researchers, practitioners, governments, international organisations and UN offices to leverage existing knowledge in applying behavioural science.

05 Support for the Implementation of the Behavioural Science Guidance Note

Given early evidence of impact and significant potential, the UN will work toward mainstreaming the use of behavioural science. Lessons learned from both inside and outside the United Nations point toward the need for a time-bound support team with interdisciplinary expertise, and interagency cooperation through a connected community.

The UN will put in place capacities and structures to support the application of behavioural science across the UN. This will include:

- **Providing advice and guidance** to help entities apply behavioural science to policy, programming, administration, and other areas of need;

- **Assisting entities with mainstreaming behavioural science**, including through developing strategies and identifying projects;

- **Strengthening capacity**, including through tailored behavioural science training and external fellowships to bridge short-term capacity gaps across the UN;

- **Developing behaviourally-informed monitoring and evaluation tools**, indicators and indexes;

- **Fostering partnerships** with external experts and practitioners, including those from the Global South;

- **Producing reports on the application of behavioural science** in the UN to which UN Entities are expected to contribute, and

- **Mobilising additional resources** to expand and sustain the application and mainstreaming of behavioural science in policy, programming and administrative opportunities.

In addition, to accelerate the opportunities presented and support this work, the UN Behavioural Science Group of the UN Innovation Network will continue to foster a behavioural science community, encourage peer-to-peer learning and support, discuss strategies for applying behavioural science and promote awareness about the UN's work on behavioural science.

06 | Conclusion

Behavioural science is a critical tool for the UN to progress on its mandate. It can contribute to combating poverty, improving public health and safety, preventing and managing crisis, promoting gender and economic equality, tackling corruption, strengthening peacebuilding and all the SDGs. At the same time, it is being used to make the public sector more efficient and holds potential in this area for the UN.

UN entities are strongly encouraged to invest in behavioural science and work in a connected and collaborative interagency community to realise its tremendous potential to achieve impact. For information on applying behavioural science in the UN system, please contact: behavioural-science@uninnovation.network.

This Guidance Note was prepared with the assistance of the UN Behavioural Science Group of UN Innovation Network and the Executive Office of the UN Secretary-General.

The UN entities that have engaged with behavioural science so far and supported the work of the Guidance and the accompanying UN Behavioural Science Report include: FAO, ICAO, IFAD, ILO, IMF, IOM, ITC-ILO, UN Global Pulse, UN Secretariat (DPPA, UNOCT, UNODC), UNDCO, UN Women, UNDP, UNEP, UNESCO, UNFCCC, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNICRI, UNITAR, WFP, WHO and the World Bank.

Annex:
Examples of Behavioural Science Use-Cases and Application

Behavioural Science Applications outside of the UN

Increasing pension enrolment: In many countries, workers are able to save for retirement using government or employer-supported pension schemes. Most of these schemes required employees to "opt-in" to participate and make a number of often complicated investment decisions, leading to suboptimal retirement savings. To address this, some Governments and companies have changed the default setting to automatically enrol workers and automatically escalate contributions, with workers able to change settings at any point. Since inception, this change in default has increased the number of people enrolled in pension saving schemes significantly, including boosting pension savings by billions in the UK alone. Initiatives in other countries (including Thailand, Georgia and Lithuania) have introduced or are considering introducing automatic enrolments.

Encouraging subsidy uptake: The Government of Indonesia runs a USD 1.5 billion rice subsidy programme to provide a nutritional safety net to its most vulnerable citizens. Due to insufficient information, many people only received a fraction of what they were entitled to. The Government tested various interventions to present information in behaviourally informed ways and increase clarity, awareness and action toward receiving the benefit. A randomised control trial found that the most effective solution - a postcard which clearly stated what recipients were entitled to - increased the benefits poor households received by 26 percent compared to the control group. Additional behaviourally informed testing of the card containing the subsidised price of rice and public information about eligibility further increased impact. In 2013, the Government of Indonesia scaled-up this low-cost innovation through an identification card (achieving the return of investment in less than two months) to 15.5 million households reaching 65 million people.

Simplifying access to financial aid: Some universities offer low-income students financial assistance to cover tuition fees. Often, this requires completing complicated forms and following cumbersome processes, which discourages many eligible students from applying. By offering detailed information and encouraging students to apply to financial aid, the University of Michigan was able to more than double the likelihood of income students applying and also double the percentage of low-income students eventually enrolling at the university. The impact could be further enhanced by simplifying bureaucratic application requirements.

Behavioural Science Applications at the UN and other international organisations

In the UN, the application of behavioural science has been rapidly growing. 25 UN entities are now ex - ploring or already leveraging behavioural science in their work. Selected examples are presented below - for a more detailed overview of initiatives, please refer to the UN Behavioural Science Report to be published in June 2021.

Simplifying tuberculosis treatment: In Moldova, tuberculosis patients are required by law to take their daily medication under the supervtision of a nurse at a clinic. This can be very time consuming and expensive and many patients do not stick to the treatment schedule. To understand the impact of this law on treatment adherence, **UNDP** ran an experiment which introduced virtual doctors' visits (thereby removing the behavioural barrier of coming to the clinic) and introduced feedback and encouragement mechanisms. The experiment showed that patients who received the intervention were twice as likely to take their medication compared to the control group. The Government of Moldova is planning to roll out virtual supervision across the country.

Preventing violence: **UN Women** explored the behavioural barriers behind low rates of reporting of violence against women and domestic violence (VAW/DV) by teachers (who are often 'bystanders') and identified levers for intervention. A survey generated insights from teachers and revealed that one of the most effective strategies to influence teachers' be - haviour was via school principals' authority. Based on this, a pilot intervention has begun to train principals to modify the instructions they give to teachers so that they feel man - dated and comfortable to report violence.

Encouraging worker registration: In Argentina, the ILO has been supporting its constitu- ents to increase the registration of domestic workers into social security programs. A be- haviourally-informed letter was written and sent to households above a certain income re- minding them of their obligation to register domestic workers and providing them with the necessary information to do so. In a randomised control trial, households who received the letter increased their registration rate by 8.9 percent compared with the control group.

Increasing tax compliance: Behavioural science can increase tax payment compliance through testing the impact of messages on compliance among different groups. Testing various behaviourally-informed interventions, in Poland, the **World Bank** found that peer comparisons increased tax compliance by 21 percent, whereas using punitive language increased tax compliance by 211 percent. If deployed at scale, this campaign could have generated 56 percent more in revenues. The World Bank has tested how people in other countries respond to different behavioural cues through similar studies in Albania, Arme- nia, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Kosovo, and Latvia.