Summit of the Future Action Days Side Event

Scaling Behavioural Science in the Global South:
Innovations, Challenges and Opportunities

September 20, 2024,- 9 am ET, Virtual

Organised by: UN Innovation Network, Executive Office of the Secretary-General

Background on the event

Behavioural science (BeSci) offers an evidence-based understanding of human decision-making and behaviour, enabling effective design of programmes, policies, and interventions. Today, much of the global BeSci efforts have been concentrated in the Global North. This side event explored the untapped potential of BeSci in the Global South and addressed the current imbalance. The program demonstrated successful partnerships between Member States, academia and BeSci units within and outside the UN. Hosted by Mary MacLennan, Senior Advisor on Behavioural Science to the Executive Office of the UN Secretary-General, the discussions focused on strategies for scaling up BeSci, strengthening global cooperation, and identifying actionable insights for UN initiatives, with a particular emphasis on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Key issues discussed

- **Brazil's Focus on Innovation and Evidence-Based Policy:** Esther Dweck, Brazil's Minister of Management and Innovation in Public Services, discussed the country's need to contextualise BeSci interventions to fit local realities, especially when addressing social welfare programs, sustainable procurement practices, and agro-ecological transitions.

- **Challenges in Embedding BeSci in Government Programs:** Desmond Duametu of the Government of Ghana shared insights from Ghana's journey of integrating BeSci into its cash transfer programs. He highlighted challenges, such as building initial government buy-in and addressing scepticism about the effectiveness of behavioural interventions, especially in context to Ghana's local economic conditions.

- **Designing Scalable and Context-Specific Interventions:** Catherine MacLeod from Ideas42 outlined the difficulty of designing interventions that are both cost-effective and

scalable in resource-limited settings. Catherine highlighted the challenge of creating a community of practice to share lessons across different countries, which is essential for achieving scale while addressing local nuances.

- **Capacity Building in Low-Income Contexts:** Khurshid Zafari of the Government of Uzbekistan shared the difficulties in establishing a behavioural science unit in Uzbekistan. He described the challenge of identifying and assisting socially vulnerable groups in a country with a large informal economy, where official records often exclude the most at-risk populations. He stressed the importance of building local capacity due to the scarcity of behavioural science expertise and resources within Uzbekistan.

- **UN's Role in Providing Support to Governments:** Ukasha Ramli from UNICEF emphasised long-term partnerships and ongoing support from the UN to help governments to build robust BeSci units.

- **Cultural Adaptation and Ethical Dilemmas:** Anisha Singh, a PhD candidate from LSE and former Vice-President at Busara, brought attention to the tension between libertarian paternalism and intention creation when applying BeSci in diverse cultural contexts. She noted that many interventions in the Global South involve not just bridging the action-intention gap but also creating intention where it does not exist.

Key recommendations for action

- **Develop Context-Specific Scaling Strategies:** Encourage governments to design interventions tailored to the cultural and social norms of their local contexts.

- **Strengthen Cooperation Networks:** Establish global partnerships between UN Entities, member states, academia and behavioural science organisations to facilitate knowledge exchange and support the formation of BeSci units.

- **Provide Capacity Building and Training:** Enhance the capacity of government officials in the Global South through UN-facilitated training programs, where academic programs on behavioural science are limited.

- **Integrate Human Rights and Gender Equality:** Ensure that BeSci initiatives align with the SDGs and are sensitive to its intersectionalities.

- **Promote South-to-North and North-to-South Learning:** Facilitate mutual exchange of knowledge and best practices between the North and South by encouraging the adaptation of successful interventions from the Global South to Northern contexts, while also leveraging expertise, resources, and research methods from the Global North to support capacity building and innovation in the Global South.

Webpage to find more information: https://www.sofscalingbesci.org/