Behavioural Public Policy for Sustainability

MPhil Paper Guide 2022 (Lent)
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Dr. Lucia Reisch (lr540@cam.ac.uk)
El-Erian Professor for Behavioural Economics & Policy
Fridays 13-15 resp. 14-16
(Stud. Assist.: Noah Peters, PhD cand., nvp20@cam.ac.uk)

Course Description

Policy tools and approaches to help reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) span a wide range, from hard to soft policies. This course focuses on Behavioural Public Policy as a recent policy approach increasingly employed by governments and supranational organizations complementing their classical instruments. We will investigate how evidence-based behavioural insights and tools (“nudges”) and BPP-specific policy processes (“nudging”) can (and already do) supplement the existing policy toolbox for sustainable development. We will have a few high-level guest speakers from academia and the science-policy interface for short inputs and in-class debate (in a hybrid model).

We begin by examining the theoretical and conceptual basics of behavioural economics and behavioural public policy. These theoretical foundations are then applied to selected sustainable development goals, focusing on specific contemporary examples. The examples studied range from adopting electric vehicles to COVID vaccine hesitancy and switching to a planetary diet and renewable energy. Next, we examine practical strategies and approaches, successes, and limits of behavioural insights-based policies. In the final part, we explore debates around the ethics and good governance of nudging and future developments of the field.

The course will consist of 7 seminars of 2 hours in length. This includes introducing key concepts (by me), a short (10 min) presentation prepared by a volunteer student, and/or a short input by a leading expert in the respective topic, followed by an in-class debate. The class will be fully online.

The readings are divided into core and further reading. Moreover, I suggest some popular science books that may serve as accessible introductory readings. Students will have read all of the core readings before each seminar. The books and reports are available in the library or online. The “further reading” is an offer for students conducting presentations or writing essays on specific topics. Moreover, we will offer one or two optional in-person drop-in sessions where you can ask questions about the material covered.

Volunteers will present in class and will receive feedback on their presentations. Presentations will not be formally assessed. Formal assessment will be in the form of a 3000 words essay submitted at the end of term. Students can choose 1 out of 6 questions.

Contributing experts

- Prof. Jan M. Bauer, Copenhagen Business School, BeaCon project (DK)
- Mary MacLennan, UN Innovation Network, UN New York (US)
- Faisal Naru, Rockefeller Foundation, formerly OECD Behavioural Team (UK)
- Prof Cass R. Sunstein, Harvard University and Harvard Law School (US)
Suggested introductory reading

The icon and must-read of Behavioural Public Policy (BPP), the second "final" edition:


An edutaining book on the origins of Behavioural Economics by one of its founders (and Nobel Laureate):


Popular science books that helped to make the field accessible (and famous):


The tale about how the first governmental nudge unit (in the UK) began:


A founding classic of Behavioural Economics (and Policy):


Session (1) Behavioural Public Policy: Foundations and Concepts
21st January, 13-15

Concepts: libertarian paternalism; choice architecture; behavioural insights; dual-process theories; biases and heuristics; nudges, shoves, budges and snudges; "sludge" (audits)

Core reading:


Further reading:

The use of green nudges as an environmental policy instrument.


**Session (2) Sustainable Development: The Science and Practice of Behavioural Change**

*28th January, 13-15*

**Concepts:** Sustainable Development Goals; behavioural science; behaviour change models; behaviour change interventions; impact

**Expert:** Mary MacLennan on *Behavioural Science for Sustainable Development at the United Nations.*

Mary is the Senior Advisor on Behavioural Science in the UN Executive Office of the Secretary-General, and Lead of the UN Behavioural Science Group in the UN Innovation Network, New York. In these roles she expands efforts and supports behavioural science application across UN Entities. As a behavioural scientist, she works with academic institutions, international organisations and governments to apply behavioural science to tackle real-world challenges (incl. behavioural science teams and as an expert advisor to the OECD and UN Women).

**Core reading:**

  https://stapgef.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/Final_Rare%20Behavior%20Change%20Interventions%20in%20Practice.pdf?null=

**Further reading:**

Session (3) Case study: The Power of the Plate
4th February, 14-16 (will be recorded)

Concepts: ecological footprint; behavioural food policy; planetary diet; food waste reduction; UN Food Systems Summit

Core reading:

Further reading:

Session (4) Evaluation of BPP: Cost-effectiveness and Acceptability
11th February, 13-15

Concepts: evidence-based policy; policy cycle; policy evaluation; cost-benefit analysis; nudges that fail; acceptability; scalability; unintended side-effects

Expert: Prof. Jan M. Bauer (CBS, Denmark) on Approaches to evaluating the benefits of BPP interventions.

Jan is an economist and consumer researcher, Associate Professor at the Consumer and Behavioural Insights Group, Copenhagen Business School. One of his research foci is on measuring the impact of behavioral interventions to induce change towards more sustainable lifestyles.

Core reading:

Further reading:

Session (5) Guest Lecture: Cass Sunstein: “Nudges, Biases and Noise”
Wednesday, 16th February, 17:30-19:00

Cass R. Sunstein is the Robert Walmsley University Professor at Harvard and serves as founder and director of the Program on Behavioral Economics and Public Policy at Harvard Law School. He is among the most cited and most-read legal scholars worldwide. Together with economist Richard Thaler, he co-authored the seminal book “Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness” (2008, 2nd edition 2021), which drew attention from academia (Nobel Prize in Economics 2017 for Thaler), global institutions, the corporate world, and governments worldwide. In 2018, Prof. Sunstein was awarded the prestigious Holberg Prize (the “Nobel” for the humanities) acknowledging his outstanding contributions to research in various fields, including behavioral public policy. From 2009 to 2012, he was the Administrator of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (President Obama). From February 2021 to the present, he has served in the Biden Administration at the Department of Homeland Security, helping to lead the Department’s approach to regulatory issues in diverse fields, including immigration, and co-leading the Department’s climate policy.

Optional Drop-in Session I.
18th February, 13-15
Goal: Time for questions, feedback, and advice.

Session (6) Limits and Pitfalls: Ethics and Good Governance of BPP
25th February, 13-15

Concepts: autonomy, paternalism, manipulation, legitimacy, ethics, good governance; participatory co-creation; Nudge Plus

Core reading:
Further reading:


Session (7) The Future of BI: Scope, Scale, and Institutionalization

4th March, 14-16 (will be recorded)

Concepts: the institutionalization of BPP; nudge units; BASIC toolbox; nudging in organizations

Expert: Faisal Naru (Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, PIC) on Building better Behavioural Teams.

Faisal Naru is the Executive Director of the Policy Innovation Centre (PIC) at the Nigerian Economic Summit Group with Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors. The PIC is Africa’s first national level “behavioural unit” and is also supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. He serves on a number of International Committees and advises a number of governments and public bodies. Prior to setting up the PIC, Faisal was at the OECD where he founded the OECD work on Behavioural Insights including the landmark publication “Behavioural Insights in Public Policy” as well as being responsible for a number of OECD publications and guidelines. At the OECD Faisal Naru was most recently the Head of Strategic Management and Coordination or “Chief of Staff” for the OECD’s Executive Director where he created a new capacity mainstreaming behavioural science into management and organisational behaviour.

Core reading:


Further reading:


Optional Drop-in Session II. Time and place to be discussed with students.