



SUMMARY OF THE KAPUSCINSKI DEVELOPMENT LECTURE

CAN BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE IMPROVE PUBLIC POLICY?

delivered by Simon Ruda

on 13th November, 2014

Small changes can make a big difference

Simon Ruda introduced the behavioural science approach to public policies, presenting different examples applied by the Behavioural Insights Team in the UK and overseas. He urges that to achieve real changes in the public policies, there is a need to focus on small details that can make a significant difference. Ruda highlighted the importance and power of the clues that people get from their peers in defining personal choices.

Giving several examples from the UK and other European countries where small changes in the presentation of the policy options to citizens brought real changes in their attitudes towards such delicate issues as paying taxes or donating organs for transplant, Ruda moved to examples of public policies that were reworked in developing countries.

Evidence form developing countries

In Kenya, Ruda showed how the Behavioural Insights Team's suggestions encouraged people to use chlorine to make their water safe to drink by placing the chlorine dispenser in the communal well. This is where people get their water but more important is the fact that it is fundamental that people need to see others using the chlorine to follow them.

In Guatemala, Ruda's team worked with the World Bank and the Guatemala Tax Authority to increase the number of people willing to declare and pay their taxes, and until now the results have been successful. The initial proportion of tax revenues in the country's budget has risen significantly after the intervention.

In Moldova, the team is working with the UNDP to encourage medicine intake by the population. The country has documented high levels of tuberculosis and multi-drug-resistant tuberculosis. A successful therapy requires the daily observation of the patient by the doctor and daily visits to a clinic. For many people this was very inconvenient, costly, or they felt ashamed to come to the clinic, as this could be seen as a stigma. The team has prepared an experimental system called Virtually Observed Treatment (VOT) where once a month patients go to collect a batch of drugs and are observed via Skype everyday taking the medicine. The results show that more patients are not only taking the medicines, but their quality of life has increased and the costs for the government have decreased.

What is the clue of the behavioural approach towards public policies?

WHAT TOP THINKERS THINK ABOUT DEVELOPMENT

Since its establishment in 2010, the Behavioural Insights Team works on a full spectrum of government policies, from immigration, crime, health, to economic growth, tax compliance and fraud, consumer empowerment, energy, etc. The typical project starts by using the Randomized Controls Trial (RCT), i.e., organizing a pilot on a certain public policy with a small group of people and seeing what works or not. There are at least two groups of people that are compared: to one is offered the behavioural insights approach, and the other not. Randomization is extremely important, Simon Ruda argues, because with randomized groups one can be sure that there is no difference between them.

Initially, the team faced much media criticism but with time their work started to be positively seen following their capacity to show a positive impact and good results. Ruda presented the most common critics to RCTs one by one: first, RCTs are not pointless and do work; second, RCTs are not expensive if you design them well, and third RCTs are not unethical because it is helping people to have access to a new policy that will improve their lives. He underlined that for him it would be unethical to spend public money on policies not knowing what the impact for the population is going to be like.

Simon Ruda ended his lecture, pointing out that small changes can be really powerful, and that they will be more likely to happen because it is easier to convince a policymaker to do a small change than to completely reform their agenda. Yet, the context to do such changes is critical as there is a need to try everything in a robust manner and to understand what the nature of the impacts are. Only then will you have the evidences required to scale up or adapt as necessary