

## **Nudge, think or shove? Shifting values and attitudes towards sustainability**

A briefing for sustainable development practitioners

November 2010

### **Summary**

Pursuing sustainability requires widespread shifts in public behaviour. This briefing builds on a recent House of Lords round table to consider three broad approaches to influencing public behaviour: 'nudge', 'think' and 'shove'. We consider the benefits and drawbacks of each, and explore how the three approaches can complement one another.

We find that:

- 'Nudge' is effective for specific, limited shifts in behaviour such as recycling.
- 'Think' is effective at building support and legitimacy for the big, transformational changes that we need in society, such as decarbonising the economy. 'Think' can be particularly powerful in building people's ability and motivation to participate in and drive those transformational changes.
- 'Shove' often helps to create the conditions under which 'nudge' is most effective.

Building on these insights, we start to sketch out an optimal mix of 'nudge', 'think' and 'shove', which uses the best of all three approaches to transform social values and attitudes towards sustainability at the pace we need.

### **Context: nudge, think and shove**

If we are to pursue sustainability, government and civil society institutions need to influence public behaviour. This briefing explores how we can most effectively do so using three approaches to influencing public behaviour: 'nudge', 'think' and 'shove'.

This briefing explores these three concepts and how they can complement one another, drawing on the findings of a high-level round table organised by DEA and Involve in October 2010 as part of DEA's wider programme on the Global Learning Charter. Speakers at the round table

included: the Earl of Sandwich; Sara Eppel, Head of Sustainable Products and Consumers, Defra; Hetan Shah, DEA Chief Executive; Simon Burall, Director, Involve; and Andrew Dobson, Professor of Politics, Keele University. All comments in this briefing are anonymised and taken from round table participants unless otherwise indicated.

A social marketing approach focuses on making sustainable behaviours "*attractive and easy*"; the most high profile example of this approach is 'nudge', a programme of interventions that is currently generating a lot of policy interest. An example of a

'nudge' towards sustainability might consist of making carbon offsetting the default option for all purchasers of flights from a particular airline. The distinctive characteristics of 'nudge' (or wider social marketing approaches) are that the shift towards more sustainable behaviour tends to be non-conscious, and that there is no element of compulsion associated with the shift. Nudge makes it easier for people to behave in a more sustainable way, but they can opt out of this behaviour.

A deliberative engagement approach focuses on informing and educating individuals and communities about the need for, and an honest assessment of the benefits of, shifting behaviours towards sustainability. This approach is most commonly found in formal education settings and has been characterised as 'think' (John and Stoker, 2010). An example of deliberative engagement is the Women's Institute's (WI) Women and Climate Change campaign, which engages local WI members in the arguments surrounding climate change, helping them to understand the science and the need to campaign for change.

A legislative approach focuses on restricting, by law, the choices that an individual person can make in relation to a range of different potential behaviours. We characterise this approach as 'shove'. An example of a 'shove' is the low emission zone in central London, which makes it illegal for heavily polluting vehicles to operate. The distinctive characteristics of 'shove' are that compulsion or a penalty drives the shift in behaviour; often government generates the 'shove'.

### **Where does 'nudge' work well?**

'Nudge' has been shown to work well in certain public policy settings (John and Stoker, 2010) where government or another institution has a specific, limited objective for behaviour change. For example feedback in the form of 'smiley faces' led to a 6% increase in household

food recycling. Social marketing approaches have the added advantage that they can be relatively cheap, and are seen to "*go with the grain of human nature.*"

'Nudge' has some limitations though. Like other social marketing approaches, it does not seek to engage or influence people's values and attitudes. Social marketing involves segmenting the public and working with existing values. However, "*sustainability...is absolutely shot through with debates around values*". Indeed there is evidence that social marketing may embed precisely the sorts of values that prevent us making progress towards sustainability (this is discussed in more detail below).

### **Where is 'think' more valuable?**

In contrast to 'nudge', 'think' approaches are relatively unproven within the sustainability field. Amongst small groups, deliberative engagement can strongly influence values and attitudes as well as behaviour, but we have not yet found a way to scale up deliberative engagement effectively.

Nevertheless, discussions at the round table make clear that 'think' can be a valuable complement to 'nudge' in at least three ways:

1. Deliberative engagement offers the prospect of "*bridging the gap between the actions that are currently attractive and easy, and the actions we need to take*" to achieve our climate, biodiversity or social justice goals. Moving towards sustainability requires us to achieve a transformational change in society; consciously engaging people in the challenges and opportunities we face may be able to achieve that change where social marketing cannot. In particular participants at the round table suggested that pursuing sustainability requires a social shift towards more intrinsic values, rather than relying on 'nudge':

*...could we have ended slavery by nudging people towards it? Could we have got votes for women by nudging people towards it, by running a marketing campaign?*

Deliberative engagement can encourage a shift towards intrinsic values (Hogg, 2010), whereas social marketing may embed and activate values that oppose sustainability (Crompton, 2010).

2. People take ownership of sustainability when engaged deliberatively.

Participants argued that the drawback of unconscious 'nudging' is that a person's behaviour only shifts for the duration of an intervention; if the 'nudge' no longer exists, the person is likely to revert to the less sustainable behaviour, unless the new behaviour has become habitual. By contrast, deliberative engagement helps a person to learn more about sustainability and offers the prospect of engaging them emotionally in the need to change. This makes it more likely that the person's shift in behaviour is long-lasting and more pervasive, because they have also shifted their attitudes and/or values.

An example is the Transition Towns movement, which has grown significantly in recent years by encouraging communities to take ownership of reducing and eventually eliminating their local area's dependence on oil.

3. Deliberative engagement avoids patronising people. Participants argued that when people feel patronised many of the levers for influencing behaviour disappear:

*...levels of trust that citizens have of government are decreasing and what that means is that they resist shove and they're actually less willing to accept changes in regulation...and they distrust nudge, they begin to see through the messages that they see in nudge...*

Many participants at the round table argued that traditional communications, social marketing approaches and legislation relating to sustainability can serve to patronise because many people perceive that there is a "big gap between the size of the problem and the size of the solutions" that they are offered through these approaches. The advantage of a 'think' approach is that it allows an open, honest discussion of the scale of change needed to pursue sustainability, and does not require the government or civil society institutions to imply they have the solution.

An example is the ongoing debate between technological solutions to climate change such as geo-engineering, and social and economic solutions such as moving to a low-growth economic model. Traditional communications may encourage proponents of geo-engineering to oversell its effectiveness. By contrast a process of deliberative dialogue may offer the space to explore the advantages and pitfalls of both approaches as well as other approaches.

For these reasons 'think' can be a valuable complement to 'nudge', and in some cases can be a more effective alternative. However, 'think' suffers from a significant challenge around its cost and political feasibility (Hogg, 2010). Promising approaches are emerging around the concept of 'distributed dialogue', which proposes using existing structures and networks to create opportunities for effective, low-cost deliberative engagement (Andersson, Burall, Fennell, 2010). However, these approaches are likely to remain "under the radar" until the government and civil society has more money available and sustainability becomes a higher political priority.

Another criticism often made towards the 'think' approach is that it appeals to a particular type of person. Some argue that

this is because there are particular segments of the population whose values are such that they are more interested in discussions and debates about sustainability and who enjoy complexity rather than wanting simple messages (for example see Rose, 2010). Others argue that the lifestyles and circumstances of less well off groups restrict their ability and inclination to participate in 'think' approaches about challenges that feel less immediate to them, but that there isn't a fundamental difference in people's values across society.

In light of this, an important question for advocates of 'think' approaches is whether it is necessary to engage all sectors or segments of the population in a deliberative approach, or whether it is enough to attract those who are more inclined to participate.

### **'Shove' often underpins 'nudge'**

Legislation to mandate behaviour change is not favoured by the current government. For example Greg Clark, Minister for Decentralisation, Communities and Local Government has spoken pejoratively about the "*bureaucracy of compulsion*", suggesting that we "*bridle when told what to do*". However, discussions at the round table suggest that the picture is more complex than simply arguing that 'nudge' can replace 'shove'. In particular, participants at the round table argued that some recent initiatives presented as 'nudges' actually rely on "*underpinning regulation that made it happen*".

For example, the energy efficiency ratings on electrical appliances look at first glance like a classic case of 'nudge'. By adding a rating to each appliance, the choice architecture of a customer's purchasing decision changes and they are encouraged (but not compelled) to purchase the more energy efficient appliance. However, the reality is more complex; the labelling itself, introduced in the early 1990s, had little

effect in the first few years: "*after about five years maybe 7% of the population were buying A-rated fridges*". The government then introduced a regulation called the Energy Efficiency Commitment, which required energy suppliers to offer energy efficient appliances at a favourable rate to customers. As a result "*we are now in a brilliant position, 90% of fridges are A-rated.*"

In this way, 'nudge' and 'shove' are closely interrelated, and the success of 'nudge' in many cases depends on effective legislation.

### **Emerging consensus: an optimal mix of 'nudge', 'think' and 'shove'**

With the benefits and limitations of these approaches in mind, we can start to sketch out the optimal mix of social marketing, deliberative engagement and legislation to shift values and attitudes towards sustainability. We use the example of climate change to bring this mix to life.

'Nudge' and/or wider social marketing approaches offer very effective ways to make it easy for people to take individual actions to combat climate change. Organisations such as Global Cool ([www.globalcool.org](http://www.globalcool.org)) are good examples of this.

'Think' complements individual actions by helping to bridge the gap between the actions we are currently taking and the larger social transformation we need to respond effectively to climate change. It can help to put individual actions in context by giving people an opportunity to think and act collectively. Global Action Plan's work is a good example of this ([www.globalactionplan.org.uk](http://www.globalactionplan.org.uk)). 'Think' also offers us an opportunity to discuss and explore the climate change challenges for which we don't currently have easy answers, such as how we can protect the climate whilst encouraging poverty reduction in poor countries. Schools and

other education institutions can play an essential role here. Think may also help to move the consensus to enable 'nudge' to ratchet up behaviour to the next level.

Climate change legislation ('shove'), such as the Climate Change Act, the Energy Efficiency Commitment mentioned above, and the Carbon Reduction Commitment can provide the framework and often the impetus for 'nudge' to happen. In turn, 'think' may build legitimacy and political capital for similar future legislation, in particular because it may help encourage and sustain committed activists or 'environmental citizens' who may campaign for change (Dobson, 2010).

We face a daunting challenge in responding to climate change because of the loss of public trust both in the science and in the scale of action currently being undertaken to mitigate the threat. There is little public or political appetite to legislate more strongly and yet it is becoming increasingly apparent that social marketing and individual behaviour change cannot stimulate sufficiently swift decarbonisation. I would propose a distributed dialogue approach to respond to this challenge, encouraging existing networks and

institutions such as the Women's Institute to talk regularly and honestly with their members and supporters about climate change (Andersson, Burall, Fennell, 2010). Such an approach can help to reinvigorate public debate, creating the space for both legislation and collective action to help us respond more effectively.

There is a strong need to investigate approaches such as distributed dialogue further, so that we can find a cost-effective, scalable approach to deliberative engagement that will allow us to transform social values and attitudes towards sustainability at the pace we need.

Therefore, far from being independent of one another, these three approaches depend on each other for their effectiveness. Although relatively expensive, 'think' can legitimise and enhance trust in both 'nudge' and 'shove', and 'shove' in turn often underpins 'nudge'. Policymakers need to find the best mix of the three and ensure that the current prevalence of 'nudge' is not maintained at the expense of the other two.

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#### Further reading

Andersson, Burall, Fennell, 2010, *Talking for a change*. Available at: <http://www.involve.org.uk/talking-for-a-change/> [cited 28<sup>th</sup> October 2010]

Crompton, 2010, *Common cause*. Available at: [http://www.wwf.org.uk/wwf\\_articles.cfm?unewsid=4224](http://www.wwf.org.uk/wwf_articles.cfm?unewsid=4224) [cited 28<sup>th</sup> October 2010]

Dobson, 2010, *Environmental citizenship and pro-environmental behaviour*. Available at: <http://www.sd-research.org.uk/post.php?p=1229> [cited 18<sup>th</sup> November 2010]

Hogg, 2010, *Do we need a deeper, more complex conversation with the public about global issues?* Available from DEA.

John and Stoker, 2010, *How experiments can help get Britain to the Big Society*. Available at: [http://www.civicbehaviour.org.uk/documents/findingsoffindingsformatted\\_002.pdf](http://www.civicbehaviour.org.uk/documents/findingsoffindingsformatted_002.pdf) [cited 28<sup>th</sup> October 2010]

Rose (2010) *Pictures in the Mind*, in Rowley and Phillips (eds) *From hot air to happy endings*. Available at: [http://www.green-alliance.org.uk/grea\\_p.aspx?id=4686](http://www.green-alliance.org.uk/grea_p.aspx?id=4686) [cited 17<sup>th</sup> November 2010]