Marketing and the UN SDGs

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# Abstract

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development sets out an ambitious plan for transforming our world. The Agenda includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are a set of global goals for fair and sustainable health at every level, and to promote prosperity while protecting the planet. If the SDGs are to be achieved, wide scale behaviour change is essential for making progress. This chapter explains how social marketing can be used to support the behaviour changes needed and provides two case examples from the United Nations World Food Programme.

# *Establishment and Aims of the Sustainable Development Goals*

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development sets out an ambitious plan for transforming our world with the overarching principle of ‘leave no one behind’ (United Nations, 2015a, p. 11). The 2030 Agenda provides the cornerstone for a collection of international agreements that set the stage for development and humanitarian cooperation. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide an overarching framework that links together the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development, the United Nations (UN) Conference on Climate Change, the World Humanitarian Summit and the Habitat III Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (United Nations, 2021).

The SDGs of the 2030 agenda are established on their predecessors – the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (United Nations, 2015b). The idea of creating a new set of global goals was one of the results of the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (also known as the "Rio+20 summit"). Before selecting the goals, the UN gathered information from governments, humanitarian groups, businesses, scientists, and academics. While both the SDGs and the MDGs aim to eradicate poverty, there are a number of key differences between the two. Although approved by UN Member States, the MDGs were actually drafted by a small group of experts. By contrast, countries have shaped and driven the Post-2015 Development Agenda, and the resulting SDGs reflect the feedback from many groups, as detailed previously. Another clear difference is the number of goals. There are an ambitious 17 SDGs and 169 targets, compared with eight MDGs and 19 targets (Kumar, Kumar & Vivekadhish, 2016).

Most of the MDGs focused on challenges facing developing countries, such as eradicating hunger and achieving universal primary education. By contrast the SDGs, through objectives such as fighting climate change and achieving peace, embrace broad principles of equality, universality and human rights, and seek to tackle the root causes of poverty and hunger and apply to rich and poor countries alike. They also look at sustainable development in three dimensions: economic, social and environmental, with the explicit purpose of contributing to the global well-being of women, newborns, families, communities, nations, and the global community (Requejo & Bhutta, 2015). Finally, the SDGs set universal and aspirational "zero-based" goals – such as ending hunger or promoting growth and work for everybody – while the MDGs had more limited goals, such as halving extreme poverty (Deveulin, 2009).

The 17 2030 Agenda SDGs are linked to the five Areas of Critical Importance (also known as the 5P’s): People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnerships (Morton, Pencheon, & Squires, 2017). Traditionally viewed through the lens of three core elements — social inclusion, economic growth, and environmental protection — the concept of sustainable development has taken on a richer meaning with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, which builds upon this traditional approach by adding two critical components: partnership and peace. The 5Ps highlight how the SDGs are an intertwined framework instead of a group of siloed goals. Progress on one P must balance and support progress on another. The UN General Assembly established the goals in 2015. The Goals were then adopted by all 193 member states of United Nations formally, for the period 2016–30.

Of the 17 SDGs, just two — eliminating preventable deaths among newborns and under-fives and getting children into primary schools — were close to being achieved before the COVID-19 pandemic (United Nations, 2020). Many of the other SDGs are far from being achieved, for example, almost 690 million people were undernourished in 2019, up by nearly 60 million from 2014 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020). The goals to eliminate poverty, climate change, hunger and inequality, health, well-being, and economic growth are slow in progress. The slow progress is due to rising rates of inequality, food insecurity, and climate change (Sachs et al., 2021). Childhood vaccination programmes have stalled in 70 countries, school closures have kept 90% of the world’s students out of school. Many women have been unable to access sexual- and reproductive-health services. At the same time, at least 270 million people face hunger.

The COVID-19 global pandemic has further disrupted some of the progress made on the SDGs to date. One recent modelling study, conducted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), found that COVID could drive the number of people living in extreme poverty to over 1 billion by 2030, with a quarter of a billion pushed into extreme poverty as a result of the pandemic (UNDP, 2021). This highlights that the goals’ ambitions are as important as ever, however fresh thinking is needed on the best ways to achieve them (Nature, 2020).

Most in the world of corporate sustainability already know that the SDGs, having been adopted by 193 UN member nations, will influence legislation, regulation and best practice business across the world. Commercial marketing and the SDGs have been discussed by authors previously (Anwar & El-Bassiouny, 2019). However, less has been discussed about the potential to use social marketing to support both individuals and communities to make meaningful and long-term behavior changes which are needed if the SDGs are to be achieved (Hayward, 2016).

# *Using social marketing principles in support of the SDGs*

Social marketing has long been confused with advertising and social media. However, social marketing is much more than just promotion; social marketing is focused on changing people’s behaviour and represents a unique system for understanding who people are, what they desire and then organizing the creation, delivery and communication of products, services and messages to meet their desires while at the same time meeting the needs of society and solve serious social problems (Smith & Strand, 2008).

Social marketing, as with commercial marketing, is a discipline which draws on psychology, sociology, behavioural economics, and anthropology in an attempt to fully understand what motivates people and the barriers to the desired behaviour change (Merritt, Truss & Hopwood, 2011). Social marketing projects also follow a systematic planning process and consider key elements, known as the Benchmark Criteria. The benchmark criteria are not designed to be a simple tick-box checklist. Instead, they are a set of integrated concepts, as shown in Table 26.1.

<Insert Table 26.1 here>

Table 26.2 The Social Marketing Benchmark Criteria

Exchange is one of the cornerstones of both social and commercial marketing (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971; Peattie & Peattie, 2003). Often ‘exchange’ is looked at in a rather simplistic way, for example, in commercial marketing, goods or services are exchanged for financial gain (i.e., money). However, exchange is not simply a monetary consideration. Instead, the exchange is often non-monetary – such as a feeling of belonging, sophistication, or security. Or an alternative product that gives customers the same or greater benefits as the product they are currently using (Smith & Strand, 2008). Therefore, the exchange is developed based on an understanding of the benefits people want, as opposed to what they need in any objective way – as well as the benefits gained from the ‘competition’.

Interlinked to the exchange is the ‘competition’ benchmark. In commercial marketing the ‘competition’ may be easy to identify, for example, Coca-Cola’s competition may be Pepsi, Red Bull, or another caffeinated soft drink. However, in social marketing the competition may not be another product, instead it may be the benefits gained from the competing behaviour (i.e., the behaviour you want people to stop). Whilst from a health or social perspective there may be no actual benefits of the behaviour, there will be benefits – perceived or actual - for the target audience. For example, a health professional might see no benefits in smoking, however smokers often talk about using cigarettes as a stress reliever, or some people may smoke to have a sense of belonging or acceptance by their peers. In order to change that behaviour, it is important to offer the same or greater benefits that the one they gain from the competition.

In social marketing, as with commercial marketing the 4P’s (product, price, place and promotion) are used. However, more recently, there has also been discussions on using the four levers of change (Figure 26.1). Recent research has shown that using a mix of interventions and utilising the four levers for change is more effective when changing habitual behaviours (Rigby, 2020), which are often key to change if we are to achieve the sustained behaviour change needed in relation to many of the SDGs.

<Insert Figure 26.1here>

Figure 26.1 Levers of change

Audience research is vital to develop an effective exchange proposition and intervention mix, and therefore is a critical part of the social marketing process. The research should explore audience needs and wants, preferences, and lifestyles as well as trusted communication channels. The research should also be conducted to understand the barriers (physical and psychological) to behaviour change and the possible enablers and motivators.

# *Social marketing in practice: Using social marketing to support the SDGs*

One UN organisation which has been using social marketing is the World Food Programme (WFP). WFP is the largest humanitarian organisation, saving lives in emergencies and using food assistance to build pathways to peace, stability, and prosperity for people recovering from conflict disasters and the impact of climate change. WFP’s efforts contribute to achieving all of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and is a key player in:

* **SDG 2** which seeks to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture; and
* **SDG 17** which highlights the need to implement and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development. WFP works in close partnership with a wide range of national and international actors including governments, other UN agencies, Non-Governmental Organisations, private sector companies and academia (World Food Programme, 2017a).

The SDGs address many issues that directly fit WFP's mandate in areas including food security and nutrition, supporting small farmers, and building resilience among the poorest and most vulnerable communities. As shown by the targets and indicators in Table 3, to achieve SDG2 and a world with Zero Hunger, providing people with food is not enough. The right nutrition, at the right time is needed to help change lives and end the cycle of poverty, and work along the whole supply chain needs to be done. WFP have nutritional programmes which aim to prevent acute malnutrition and treat moderate-acute malnutrition. Malnutrition is caused not simply by eating insufficient food, it is caused by not eating enough of the *right* foods to support healthy growth and prevent micronutrient deficiencies, such as anemia. Despite excessive dietary consumption, obese individuals suffer from malnutrition and often have high rates of micronutrient deficiencies (Via, 2012). Therefore, as with all the SDGs, achieving the SDG2 goal requires both individuals and wider communities to make meaningful and long-term changes to their dietary and eating behaviors.

<Insert Table 26.2 here>

Table 26.2 Targets and indicators for SDG2

# *Using social marketing in practice*

The next section details two case examples which detail how WFP has used the principles of social marketing to develop more effective behavior change programmes in relation to the SDG2 and SDG17 goals.

## *Case example #1: Using social marketing to improving hand hygiene practices in Tajikistan*

*Contributing to SDG2 (Zero Hunger)*

Diarrhoeal disease ranks among the top 1% of causes of death globally, with young children being particularly vulnerable (Ejemot-Nwadiaro et al., 2021; Mbakaya, 2017). Diarrhoea also contributes to malnutrition due to a decreased nutritional intake and diminished absorption of vital nutrients during the acute episode and recovery period. Malnutrition, in turn, decreases the ability of the immune system to fight further infections, making diarrheal episodes more frequent.

A clear behaviour can reduce the risk of diarrhoea – hand washing. Studies have shown that encouraging hand washing can reduce the number of times children have diarrhoea by around 30%, in communities in low to middle‐income countries and in child‐care centres in high‐income countries (Ejemot-Nwadiaro et al., 2021). However, people are not always as good at handwashing as they think they are! Family interviews conducted by WFP in Tajikistan found that everyone knew they should wash their hands with soap. Parents often explained that, whilst they “always” used soap, it was difficult to ensure their children did. However, the household observations showed a different picture. Although stating they washed their hands with soap, most adults and children only used water, simply holding their hands under a tap for a few seconds. Soap was reserved for guests. Due to this personal self-deception, simply telling people to use soap or evoking fear, would not work.

Based on this finding,WFP decided to draw on the principles of social marketing and behavioural science to develop a series of interventions to support good hand hygiene, create new habit cues, and encourage social commitment.

## *Key insights*

In addition to the belief that they currently practiced good hand hygiene as mentioned previously, the formative research highlighted some additional key insights which were then used to develop the exchange proposition and interventions and create more effective messaging. The key insights included:

* *Fatalistic attitude*. Diarrhoea was simply perceived as a childhood illness that one could not prevent. Although parents expressed concern, there was a fatalistic attitude to it and an assumption that ‘*all children get diarrhoea often’*.
* *Fear of gossip*. Participants were very concerned with gossip. They did not want their neighbours to think that they were “*bad parents*” or had an “*unclean home*”.
* *A mother’s role.* The role and priorities of what a mother should do was confusing at times. For example, mothers would explain that their primary role is to “*cook and clean*” and only in their free time do they “*look after the children*”. This led to confusion over who actually had the ultimate responsibility for a child’s care and nutrition and resulted in no single person taking responsibility for a child’s welfare.

# *Intervention mix development*

Based on the key insights, a mix of interventions were developed. The interventions could not use mass media – in the rural locations most people do not own televisions, radios or mobile phones, and there is no internet. Instead, the interventions included a mix of nudges (Thaler & Cass, 2008)and marketing interventions (Table 26.3).

<Insert Table 26.3>

Table 26.4. Interventions

The social marketing interventions focused on re-programming the existing habit (to wash hands with water only). UV germ scanners were used to help families realise how easily germs are spread and the difference washing with soap for 20 seconds can make. The scanners helped to make the invisible – visible.

Simple nudges were used. Mirrors were placed above wash basins as past studies have found that having mirrors promotes better handwashing. Signs were displayed on the back of toilet doors and by cooking areas, reminding people now to wash their hands with soap. In some places, footprints were painted for people to follow – leading them from the toilet to the washbasin. Point-of-sale marketing was also done in the local shops to encourage the more frequent purchasing of soaps.

Due to the shared family responsibilities around looking after children and preparing foods, a whole family intervention was created, as opposed to one specifically targeting mothers. The family pledges were used to encourage social commitments, with an emphasis on altruism as family members promise to protect each other. This intervention linked clearly to the exchange proposition; instead of communicating health benefits of hand washing which had been unsuccessful previously within the community, the message communicated focused on village pride and respect of neighbours. Families which had made the pledge were given a certificate which they displayed outside their house, denoting that they were a ‘clean’ household.

The intervention mix was tested using nimble trial methods (The World Bank, 2018). In different locations, different mixes of interventions were rapidly trialled to understand what works, or what works best, in rural village communities. A household survey was conducted as well as household observations. This mixed methods approach was adopted as the formative research highlighted that the results often differ between what people say they do, with what they actually were observed to be doing.

Positive changes in beliefs around the importance of using soap and water were found in the intervention groups at follow-up. Whilst at baseline most people agreed with the statement that handwashing with just water was sufficient, this changed in both the intervention groups at follow-up, but not in the control group. Positive shifts were also observed in hand washing practices, increasing from 10% at baseline to an average of 95% at follow-up. They were significantly higher in the intervention groups than in the control group which increased from 10% to 40% at follow-up. Some increase was seen in the control group as more generalised messages were being sent around hand hygiene by government and other organisations due to the spread of Covid cases. .

This project is now being upscaled to other rural communities in Tajikistan.

## *Case example #2: Using social marketing principles to create and connect smallholder farmers to sustainable markets in Tunisia*

*Contributing to SDG2 (Zero Hunger) and SGD17 (Partnerships for the goals).*

Despite producing 70-80% of the world’s food (Ricciardi et al., 2018), smallholder farmers are often food insecure themselves and face challenges in profitable market engagement and access. Smallholder farmer income and food security are constrained by a number of factors that limit their access to technology, finance, information, knowledge and markets (Rapsomanikis, 2015). Smallholder farmers find it challenging to compete in formal markets, despite extensive development efforts to increase agricultural production and improve crop quality. Lack of transport and access to reliable markets are two common constraints faced by smallholder farmers (Aku et al., 2018). Many of these farmers receive low prices for their products by selling them at their farm gate or local markets. However, these smallholder farmers could receive much higher prices by providing them with access to sustainable and efficient markets.

Considering this global reality, WFP saw a pressing need to create an ecosystem and use the principles of social marketing to increase both the supply of and demand for locally grown foods. The aim was to target the untapped potential of technology to connect smallholder farmers with reliable buyers - local school canteens.

At the start of the project, WFP undertook formative research with farmers, as well as school chefs, school administrators, parents, and children to try and understand both supply and demand factors. Through the research WFP gained a comprehensive understanding of the barriers and enablers, as well as the elements that influence the users’ decisions and actions away from preconceived ideas and assumptions. The research focused on the audiences’ interest, attitude, self-efficacy, habits, personal characteristics, intent, and rationality. The research also explored the demand among local communities and schools, and among farmers.

## *Key insights*

In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted. The interviews identified several key insights, including:

* *Smallholder farmers were risk-averse*. Despite their daily struggles, many of the smallholder farmers were wary of supplying to a new market. They were concerned about the need to grow different crops, or enough of a certain crop, and length of time to payment.
* *Lack of current demand for locally sourced foods.* When interviews were conducted with parents of school-aged children, they did not value locally sourced foods. However, they were concerned about the use of pesticides and were prepared to pay more for organic produce.
* *Lack of a streamlined system.* The current procurement system for school meals involved multiple paperwork completed by numerous people along the supply chain. This resulted in there being long delays from delivery to payment for farmers, resulting in only the large farmers being able to afford such terms of business.

# *Intervention mix development*

Based on the formative research findings, WFP created a fit-for-purpose digital solution that connects smallholder farmers with school canteens through a network of private transporters. The digital tool titled the ‘Last Mile Ecosystem’ helps to establish the supply system ensuring that farmers have a market for their fresh produce and are paid quickly due to all the paperwork being digitalised. Schools use the digital tool to state the type and amount of produce they need that coming week or month, and local farmers detail how much they can supply of it. The project provides smallholder farmers access to schools through a network of local transporters and ensures a shorter and quicker food supply chain of fresh food.

A social marketing campaign is also being co-designed with school children and parents to promote the value of locally sourced foods. The social marketing campaign around the food system improves the diets of school-aged children, through which a significant number of interconnected objectives related to agriculture and food, nutrition and poverty will be achieved for the SDGs. Figure 2 shows how LME contributes to three priority areas – Rural Transformation, Sustainable Infrastructure and Human Capital Development to achieve the SDGs and supporting national governments.

<Insert Figure 26.2 here>

Figure 26.2 LME and the SGDs

# *Future research*

The SDGs are as relevant today as when they were established. However, the need to focus on achieving individual and community behaviour change in relation to the SDGs has taken time to be fully understood by policy makers and many of the key organisations delivering programmes to achieve the SDGs. There is a need for further research to explore how behaviour change and the principles of social marketing can be better integrated into the existing universal and equitable access and service provision work which is often focused on and prioritised in relation to achieving the SDGs. Of course, if, for example, you want people to practice safe sanitation and hygiene, toilets and wash facilities are needed. But supply alone is insufficient; behaviour change is vital but is often only considered an ‘add on’ or a ‘second thought’ instead of being integrated from the start of the programme development.

Another area for further research is in relation to exploring individuals and communities' understanding of their role in achieving the SDGs. When behaviour change is discussed in relation to the SDGs, there is often a focus on policy and legislation changes. Whilst policy instruments provide opportunities for governments to stimulate behaviour change, it is questionable whether simply using policy measures is likely to be sufficient. By relying on policy measures, individuals and communities may not see the need for them to make changes to their own behaviours, and in many developing countries, enforcing new policy measures can be a challenge.

# *Conclusions*

Despite the progress made in relation to two of the seventeen SDGs prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, we are still a long way off achieving most of the goals. In order to achieve, or partially achieve them, behaviour change plays a vital role and social marketing is well placed to make a valid contribution. In order to gain greater buy-in for social marketing across governments and key organisations, such as the UN agencies, there is a need for replicable and scalable examples of how social marketing has been used.

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