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Social norms in market systems development:

A practitioner-led research brief

Brief

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The BEAM Exchange is a facility for knowledge exchange and learning about the role of market systems approaches in reducing poverty.

This practitioner brief represents the output of a facilitated engagement between practitioners facing specific challenges in programme design, implementation and evaluation, and academic specialists from relevant disciplines outside market systems development. The aim was to bring together practitioner challenges, academic theory and empirical evidence, in order to generate new learning and knowledge relevant for market systems practice. It is one of two briefs produced through these processes. Both briefs are available at www.beamexchange.org.



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1. Introduction and context

The BEAM Exchange began the practitioner-led research initiative to support innovation by groups of practitioners who face common challenges in exploring how connections could be built between existing groups of practitioners and researchers or specialists. The aim is primarily to support practitioners to look at their current situations through new theoretical lenses and to make recommendations for new practices, rather than gathering and interpreting new data about these approaches.

This research brief captures the experience of one group of practitioners interested in integrating knowledge on social norms from fields outside of market systems into their work on identifying and measuring systemic change. The group includes representatives from MarketShare Associates (MSA), CARE International, Habitat for Humanity International, ACIDI/VOCA and Mesopartner. The social norms specialists are Ben Cislighi from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine and Holly Shakya from the University of California San Diego.

This research brief outlines key ideas from social norms theory and explores implications for research and implementation by market systems development (MSD) programmes. It is meant to help programme teams grasp the social norms at play in their current situation so they can factor them into intervention design and iteration by monitoring the impacts of their interventions.

Under USAID's Leveraging Economic Opportunities ([LEO](#)) project, the group of practitioner organisations began developing new frameworks for thinking about and measuring systemic change, as well as testing a suite of measurement tools to capture the complex positive and negative impacts of MSD programmes operating in various contexts. In parallel, with the support of the BEAM Exchange, MSA undertook a review of how social norms are understood and addressed within MSD programmes. Mesopartner, also supported by BEAM Exchange and in collaboration with the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and Itad, did research on systemic change in market systems, among other things looking into how social institutions, of which social norms are part, shape economic change. This collective work led to a number of publications in 2016, such as:

- *Disrupting System Dynamics: a framework for understanding systemic changes* (MarketShare Associates 2016a)
- *Testing Tools for Assessing Systemic Change: Synthesis Paper* (MarketShare Associates 2016b)
- *The Social Norms Factor: how gendered social norms influence how we empower women in market systems development* (Markel et al. 2016) and
- *Rethinking systemic change: economic evolution and institutions* (Jenal and Cunningham 2016).

Collectively these contributions revealed a key tension underlying current practices within the MSD community: social norms are a powerful indicator of systemic change but most MSD initiatives do not try to address or measure them as part of their vision for systems change. Changes in norms, the informal rules that govern collective behaviours and expectations of behaviour, are a key indicator of the depth of systemic change, given their collective nature and strong influence on how a system functions and the difficulty in changing norms (Marketshare Associates 2016a).

However, most existing tools to measure systemic change focus solely on capturing changes in individual behaviours (an individual can be a person, single business or other market actor), not in the norms themselves.

Example 1: Agriculture inputs retailer

If a programme wants to change the behaviour of agriculture inputs retailers to offer more information and after-sales service to poor customers, and sets up its monitoring and evaluation system to measure individual behavioural practice indicators of this change (e.g. number of customer visits), programme staff might remain blind to the effect of social norms on input retailer behaviour and therefore not understand some key incentives for why individual behaviours are continuing. For example, there could be a negative social norm affecting competition such as the industry acceptance of selling fake agricultural inputs to farmers without their knowledge. In this case, there could be a social norm allowing input retailers not to disclose this information to their customers. Other retailers uphold this norm by not sanctioning this negative behaviour. In this case, a measurement system focused on the individual behaviour of the input retailer might tell the programme that (desired) change is occurring (or not) in the given moment, but it would fail to shed light on the (multiple) social norms influencing why the behaviour of the inputs retailers was not changing, and is not a sufficient indication of whether or not the practice would “stick” or become a systemic change over time.

MSD programmes have limited resources and time, and a question remains whether the MSD community can actually affect systems change without addressing these entrenched social behaviours. The question that this practitioner-led research aimed to address was therefore: **How can changes in social norms best be measured and tracked as key indicators of (both positive and negative) systemic change?**

While methods and tools exist to measure changes in social norms in international development (e.g. community-level gender assessments), these tools tend to focus on norms and behaviours that influence individual people, usually at the village level. Few exist to measure changes in social norms in the context of market systems programmes. A suite of tools is urgently needed to push MSD programmes to think about and capture their impacts at a deeper level than is currently being done.

2. Key theoretical frameworks and concepts

Social norms: ‘Social norms are behavioural rules shared by people in a given society or group; they define what is considered “normal” and appropriate behaviour for that group.’ (Cislaghi and Heise, 2017)

1. Social norms, similar to systems, are an interaction between the individual and the social (or collective).

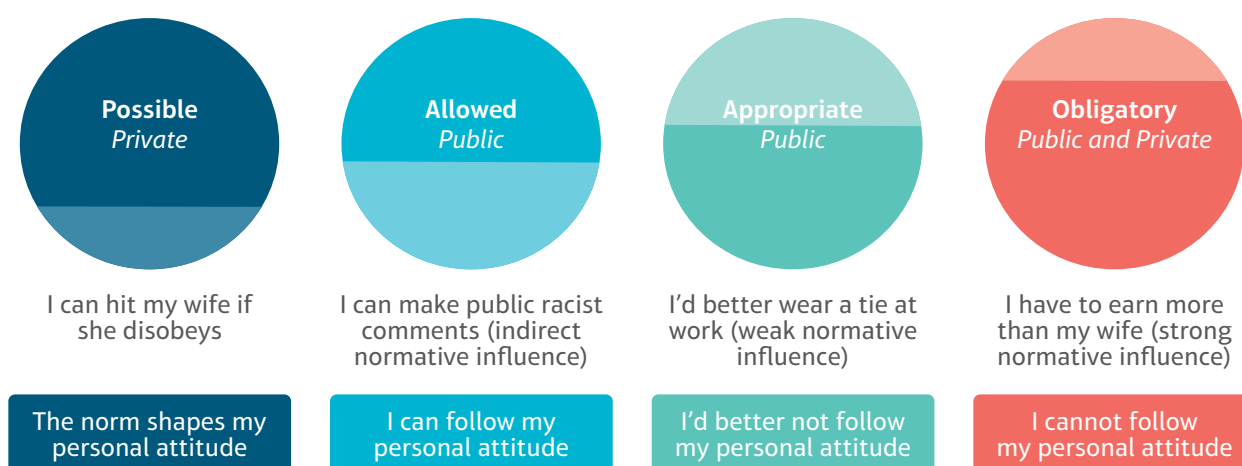
In international development, most work on social norms has focused on game theoretical approaches, which narrowly view norms as behavioural preferences based on three key beliefs: (a) most people engage in the behaviour of interest; (b) everyone expects me to engage in that behaviour; and (c) if I do not conform to those expectations I will be sanctioned negatively.

Drawing from social psychology, particularly the work of Robert Cialdini (1987), a useful and practical working definition of norms includes both *descriptive norms* (what people believe others do) and *injunctive norms* (what people believe others approve and disapprove of) (Cialdini, Kallgren and Reno 1991). Building on this, it is important to think of norms as an interaction between individual preferences on the one hand and notions of what is socially acceptable on the other. This is important to MSD practitioners because it highlights the connection between norms and systems.

2. Social norms have a diversity of strengths which affect the potential for change

The figure below shows how this interaction affects the spectrum of what is considered possible in contexts with different strengths of norms. A game theoretical approach to social norms limits the definition of social norms to the “obligatory” sphere, a restrictive approach which ignores many interrelated factors contributing to behaviour (Cislaghi and Heise, under review).

Figure 1: Four avenues of normative influence



Source: Cislaghi and Heise (under review)

3. Understanding that social norms exist within *reference groups*

An important practical aspect of working with social norms is to recognise that **social norms exist within *reference groups***. A reference group is composed of those people to whom an individual turns for expectations regarding a particular behaviour. **Reference groups can differ according to behaviours.**

For example, the group of people that may set expectations for the ability of a woman in a traditional cultural setting to sell her produce (e.g. groundnuts) at a local village market might be her family and her close community. However, those who set the expectations regarding the social rules that govern the buyers and transporters in the groundnut market system are likely to come from more diverse social and geographic settings. A reference group is not as simple as a cluster of people within a single geographic area (e.g. all of the people in a village), but rather it will reflect important social ties and social functions (Shakya, Christakis and Fowler 2014). Some examples of reference groups within a market systems context include:

- For the female groundnut farmer, when considering her ability to sell in a local market, the reference groups could be her family members (including in-laws) or her neighbours
- For a middle-class agricultural inputs retailer, the reference group with the most influence on his willingness to offer information and training to poor farmers may be his friends and colleagues of a similar class background, or his competitor input retailers from other towns. Another reference group might be higher status wholesalers, whom he might fear will sanction him for getting too close to poor farmers, and thus limit his ability to 'move up' in the value chain later in his career.

4. Social norms are a determinant of behaviour

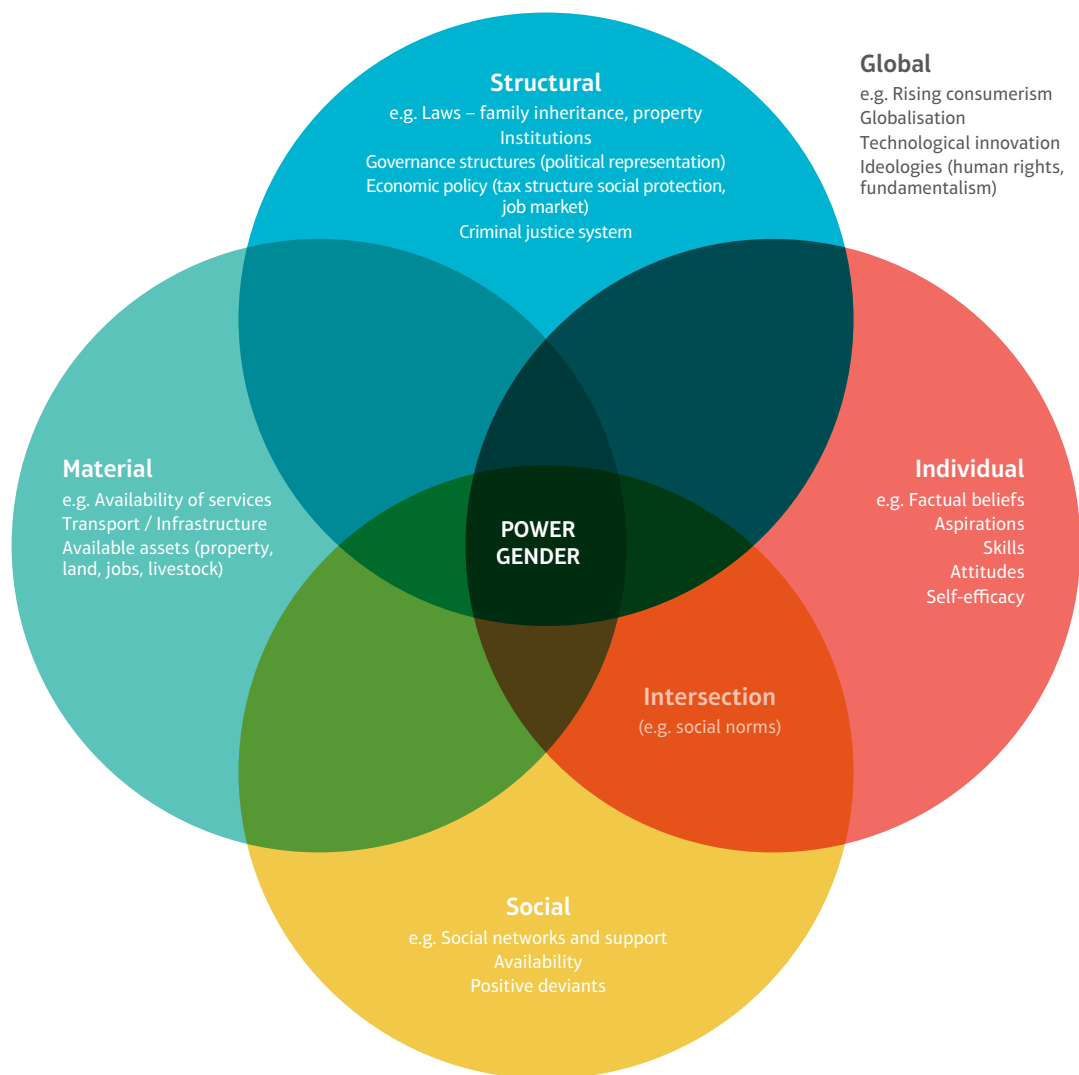
Another important aspect of understanding social norms as a determinant of behaviour is that **social norms do not necessarily map directly onto behaviours**. This is due to several factors: people are simultaneously part of different reference groups; complex networks of social norms are often at play (not just a single social norm); and various group expectations and individual preferences that ultimately determine behaviour are integrated in many different ways. These factors are not neatly predetermined and not consistent across contexts.

For example, the inputs retailer may feel pressure to adhere to the social norm of buying 'fake' agricultural inputs prevalent among his reference group of peer retailers. At the same time, he may also feel pressure to pay more for 'real' inputs to treat customers fairly who live in the same compound as his family and might speak badly of him if he is caught selling them ineffective products. It is not easy to predict or predetermine which reference group will exert more influence.

It is also important to situate social norms in a wider context that includes the full range of factors sustaining a behaviour: individual, social, material, structural and global (Cislaghi and Heise 2017). This helps position social norms as one of many possible influences, thus avoiding the situation of labelling all behaviour change strategies as solely a social norms issue.

One framework that does this is shown below (Cislaghi and Heise, 2017). The **Individual** (I) domain includes factors specific to the person: biological conditions, knowledge and psychological characteristics. The **Social** (So) domain includes factors such as: whether there are positive deviants within the group, the degree of gender or racial heterogeneity and configuration of existing social networks. Factors in the **Material** (M) domain include material resources such as access to money, land, services etc. The **Structural** (S) domain includes formal rules and regulations (laws, policies, or religious rules). Finally, the **Global** (G) domain includes major global trends, such as globalisation, as well as other factors that shape the international system, such as human rights ideology (Cislaghi and Heise 2017).

Figure 2: Five-dimension framework of behaviour change



Source: Cislighi and Heise (2017)

The ‘flower’ framework of behaviour is a useful tool for understanding how multiple domains of society interact as determinants of behaviour. The five domains depicted in Figure 2 intersect, influencing people’s choices and actions. **Practitioners can use the framework to identify possible factors that sustain a given practice.** Social norms – beliefs about others’ behaviour and expectations – would be found in the intersection between the Individual and Social domains: ISo. An example of ISoM intersections would be access to health services. People access health services when: 1) those services physically exist (M); 2) they know what those services offer and when they should visit them (I); and 3) they believe that they will not incur social disapproval if they visit the health service; i.e. that there are no social norms (ISo) preventing them from accessing the service (Cislighi and Heise 2017).

3. Implications and recommendations for practice

One of the overarching implications for practice is that **MSD programmes need to first take stock of how much they know about social norms in their context**, because the choice of measurement tool depends on the state of existing knowledge (Cislaghi and Heise 2017).

It can be useful to think about four different levels of understanding regarding social norms in a specific context and a framework for exploration dependent on that level. However, engagement with this process is contingent on first identifying the behaviour of interest, which, depending on the context, and the complexity of the programme, may or may not be obvious. The four stages overleaf are taken directly from Cislaghi and Heise (2017):

(1) Explore the potential influences of social norms

Practitioners should discover the degree to which a social norm is a salient influence on the behaviour in question. This step involves collecting evidence regarding the existence of social norms in support of that particular behaviour. A practical suggestion includes:

- **Practical Tip:** Data collection at this stage is preferably qualitative and can include the use of ethnography, open ended individual interviews, focus group discussions, and interactions with local experts. A useful strategy for these interviews is the use of exploratory vignettes, in which the interviewer uses a narrative example of a situation specific to the behaviour in question, and elicits from the respondent their predictions regarding how people would react to different decisions made by the fictional characters depicted in the vignette. Throughout this process, practitioners would also attempt to identify the reference group.

Example 2: Exploratory vignettes to elucidate social norms

In the case of the women selling her groundnuts, this phase would involve interviews with a number of different women and other community members, as well as observation of who is selling what to whom at local village markets. An example of an exploratory vignette would be a hypothetical situation of a married woman who has groundnuts she wants to sell. Then the interviewer would ask 'What would she do?' and follow with 'What would her husband expect her to do? Her mother-in-law?' They could explore contingencies such as 'What would the woman do if her husband were away for a week?' In this way, it is possible to probe the expectations of different parties that would be affecting the decisions the individual made, learning about the influence of different reference groups in the process.

(2) Investigate dynamics of influence of social norms

In cases where there is evidence of influence from social norms regarding a behaviour from previous evaluation or research, this level of exploration involves the use of qualitative research to confirm or refute the hypotheses raised by these initial findings.

For instance, there may be existing data, such as demographic and household surveys, on differences between attitudes and behaviours, which suggest that a social norm is overriding individual attitudes/preferences and causing people to adopt behaviours that run counter to their own preferences. Or there may be strong patterns of behavioural differences by ethnic group or geographic cluster, a clue that the specific cluster of socially connected individuals is reinforcing that behaviour. To further explore a programme team's hypotheses generated by this sort of data, direct qualitative questions through interviews and focus groups are recommended.

- **Practical Tip:** More specific vignettes - particularly where there the main character violates or goes against the prevailing norm (called non-compliance) - can be useful here. Consider a programme that has undertaken several interviews of the agricultural inputs retailers in a city, and developed a preliminary hypothesis that the retailers of a certain ethnicity adhere to the social norm of accepting the lowest-cost bulk inputs from their wholesaler (who is of the same ethnicity) without questioning the quality or efficacy of those inputs because it would be inappropriate to question someone of a higher status. Given that the prevalence of fake agricultural inputs is a major constraint to improving the market system, a more involved vignette could pose questions to members of this group that start out similar to the 'Explore' questions, but then branch into asking about how peers, or wholesalers themselves, would react if a retailer of that ethnic group were to challenge their wholesaler and ask for a test of quality before agreeing to purchase their next order of agro-chemicals.

(3) **Measure** changes to social norms as part of systems change measurements

Where there is good evidence of a link between social norms and specific practices or behaviours, it is appropriate to use surveys to quantify and statistically confirm the relationship in question. Building on a deeper qualitative understanding of social norms, measurement usually involves quantitative instruments (surveys) to measure prevalence of beliefs, both about what others do and about what others expect. Again, vignettes can be used, but in this case individuals would be asked to rate how they think others would judge certain behaviours (conforming or not conforming to social norms).

An example of a quantitative survey that could be used for this purpose is CARE's Social Norms Analysis Plot (SNAP) tool. When investigating social norms related to child marriage, CARE used the following quantitative survey questions (Stefanik 2016):

"Now, I would like to ask you what you think others do in regards to adolescent girls' marriage. Please answer the following questions as it relates to your community context. (Questions are a 4-point scale from 'Agree a lot' to 'Disagree a lot' including 2 other options: 'Don't know' and 'Refuse to answer')

1. *Most adolescent girls marry before the age of 17.*
2. *Most people in the community expect adolescent girls to get married before the age of 17 years.*
3. *Marrying early avoids social stigma.*

(4) Considerations **for analysing social norms data**

Assuming you followed step 3 and measured social norms using quantitative surveys, you are now faced with challenge of analysing and interpreting social norms data. There are two main considerations that need to be factored into this process, which can be easily left out:

Analysis should include both individual attitudes and perceptions of the behaviours and behavioural expectations of the reference group. It is crucial to spend time figuring out the most appropriate level of analysis: national, regional, village or group. It may be that across a national market system only 20% of market actors believe that they are being cheated, while 80% believe they are not. However, it may be that when we disaggregate at the level of a specific market actor type (e.g. traders) or within a specific region, the numbers are completely different. This localized specificity is important for analysis, and can be further illuminated using social network analysis to look at the specific relationships that hold together a reference group.

Another caveat or caution when interpreting and analysing data on social norms is that the presence of a norm does not necessarily indicate that it is a powerful norm that will influence

someone's behaviour. Researchers in the field of social norms are still themselves searching for methods to evaluate the strength of normative beliefs over people's behaviour. This is partly caused by the range of other factors influencing behaviour (material, structural, individual) other than social norms, as illustrated in the "flower framework" (Cislaghi and Heise, 2017).

4. Conclusion

This brief summarises the work to date by a committed group of practitioners and academics seeking to bridge the research on social norms with the realities of implementing market systems development. Its main contribution is a synthesis of major theoretical concepts on social norms, and the preliminary application of these concepts to hypothetical examples in an MSD context.

MSD practitioners are constantly seeking to change behaviour in their work, from customer purchasing behaviours, to farmers decisions about adopting technologies or agricultural practices, to women's access to resources and agency to make economic decisions. Each of these individual behaviours can be analysed using the concepts in this brief. The analytical challenge for researchers is to adapt their conceptual frameworks to illuminate what happens when individuals are embedded in organisations (businesses, government agencies, NGOs) that are themselves interacting in a larger network. Current research is very individual/agent-centric and for this field to be of greater value to market systems practitioners, it needs to be broadened to look at the interplay between individual and organisational or collective behaviours and how they are influenced by social norms.

For practitioners, the key is to find the patience, discipline and rigour to apply these concepts to field-level programming. Given the pressures of deadlines, reporting and accountability, the share of mind required to think through social norms may be one of the major barriers to widespread uptake. However, the link between systems change and social norms brings light to the importance of identifying and measuring social norms for market systems practitioners. Understanding social norms can help us better understand systems, and how we as practitioners can contribute - in an inclusive way - to a systems evolution and how it affects the actors within it.

Many of the recommendations presented in terms of exploring, investigating, measuring and analysing social norms are likely to fall into the domain of monitoring and results measurement (MRM) teams, as well as into upfront and applied market research. A practical recommendation for moving forward would be to present some of the findings and concepts from this paper to gatherings of leading MRM practitioners and consultants (for example, at the DCED Global Seminar on Results Measurement), as well as to an expert group working on conducting market analyses, upfront and applied.

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