

# Social and behaviour change as a key to food and nutrition security

## Experience from implementing the Global Programme on Food and Nutrition Security, Enhanced Resilience

### Introduction

In the face of complex global challenges, Social and Behaviour Change (SBC) provides a proven framework for promoting sustainable, community-driven change by addressing the deeply rooted social and structural factors that influence human behaviour.

SBC encompasses all strategies and measures that empower people to change values, social norms, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. Various disciplines can be used, such as sociology, psychology, communication sciences or behavioural economics. SBC has become a cornerstone of effective development cooperation – not only in the field of nutrition. It helps people to make everyday decisions that are better for them and their environment. SBC can also be crucial to ensuring that desired changes in technology, infrastructure, regulation, markets, training, or more generally, capacity development work at all.

Whether in times of stability or crisis, SBC allows us to understand the realities of people and to co-create solutions in a tailored, adaptive, and participatory way.

The Global Programme „Food and Nutrition Security, Enhanced Resilience“ contributes to (1) improving access to diverse foods for women and young children, (2) fostering

behavioural changes for a healthy nutrition, (3) strengthening policymaking as a lever for food security and resilience, and (4) diffusing robust best practices for improved nutrition.

The programme has **reached up to 6 million people**.

**Evidence** shows that women participating in project activities now feed themselves and their children better – even in crises. Key opportunities for improving child nutrition lie (1) right after the exclusive breastfeeding period, when complementary foods should be diverse, and (2) after weaning, when missing milk feeds must be adequately replaced.

Children's nutrition strongly correlates with women's social status. Project participants gain more influence in household decisions and receive more support to ease their workload – though outcomes vary across countries. Promoting nutrient-rich crops combined with nutrition counselling proves highly effective. Supported households show measurable improvements in dietary diversity, even in food-insecure contexts.

A large part of these successes is rooted in effective social behaviour change strategies.



## Transforming Eating Habits: Why Social and Behaviour Change Is Essential for Better Nutrition

### Imagine for a moment that you had to change your eating habits. Difficult?

With social and behaviour change (SBC), we can support people to do this. SBC can help people change their attitudes, beliefs, and practices. All of these play a major role in whether or not people feed themselves and their dependents enough healthy food.

As nutrition experts, we can make suggestions for good nutrition and increase knowledge. We can advise governments on making good food cheaper and more available. We can support farmers and the processing industry in producing enough diverse and healthy food. However, in a rapidly

changing world, consuming enough and healthy food often means changing eating habits, and that is difficult.

In our programme context, it is often not only a matter of wants and needs. Social and Behaviour Change (SBC) also addresses deeper issues such as gender norms and culturally rooted practices — for example, whether eggs, milk, meat, or fish are consumed or not. These are frequently not questions of individual preference but are shaped by long-standing cultural beliefs and behaviours.

To understand whether people can eat enough healthy food and whether they want it, we need to understand and assist them, finding feasible, contextualized and desirable practices.

## SBC approaches

There are two fundamentally different ways of approaching SBC.

The ,Classic SBC ‘ way of intervention: here, (nutrition and SBC) experts study a problem and analyse the target groups. On this basis, the experts develop solutions or interventions themselves that are intended to help the target groups change their attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, based on a barrier and enabler study. This way assumes that it is possible for experts to develop and communicate knowledge and solutions directly or indirectly via media or trainings that can be adopted and implemented by the target groups. It works from the outside in (experts > target groups) and follows the logic ,from knowledge to action‘. Of course, target groups and other stakeholders are involved as much as possible in the definition of messages or behaviours and the development of SBC formats. However, experts tend to remain in the driving seat, bringing hypotheses with them, testing them and developing solutions. This approach can be highly effective for challenges that are relatively straightforward and lend themselves well to structured, rational design processes.

The **Positive Deviance (PD)** way works in reverse, from the inside out and from action to knowledge. It focuses neither on expert knowledge nor on the problems, since it assumes that many behavioural issues are too complex for rational design. One indicator for this would be if ‘expert solutions’ have already been tried with little success. As the name suggests, we use PD to systematically search for existing behavioural solutions instead of analysing the problems. Positive deviants are individuals, groups or organizations where data tells us they do significantly better than others regarding the development goals, despite all the obstacles. They don’t have any extra resources, so it’s likely that they have somehow deviated from common practices and found small behavioural solutions with a decisive impact. Often, they are not even particularly aware of their behavioural innovations. With PD, we find these so-called ‘micro behaviours’ together with a community, and the community then decides whether and how they want to spread them further as a new norm. Unlike ,expert solutions‘, we know for sure that these local tacit solutions work, even without further resources. This way, we accelerate the diffusion of local practice-based knowledge, rather than promoting externally derived evidence-based practices.



### The two general SBC ways in short

- › **Classic way:** Outside-in, knowledge to practice, analysing the problem and designing expert solutions, evidence-based practices, that are expected to be new best or good practices.
- › **Positive Deviance (PD):** Inside-out, practice to knowledge, finding and spreading existing local and tacit solutions (emerging practices) and facilitating the establishment of new practice-based knowledge and behaviours.

## Good practice

For both ways, it is important that the process is done in stages, but flexibly and adaptively, involving specific communities or representatives of broader audiences. New attitudes and behaviours can hardly be planned. Appropriate approaches must be found along the way. Rather than proposing specific communication formats, project proposals should therefore focus on a good process description and initially formulate very generic indicators. Formative analysis of audiences, finding adequate SBC formats and/or discovering new practices with PD needs time and should be part of implementation.

On the classical path, we first decide together with our partners which general attitudes, norms or behaviours would make a particularly big difference for the development effects to be achieved (good nutrition, health, hygiene ...). Then we look at the context and its factors that prevent or support desired behaviour for different target groups. We decide whether SBC is generally suitable at all, or whether contextual factors such as income, environment, crises, availability of resources, or regulations prevent new behaviours too strongly. This level of analysis is already beyond the scope of a fact-finding mission. In each context, we then look at **priority audiences** that we can reach well and whose behavioural change makes a difference. We conduct an **in-depth audience analysis** to understand what prevents people from behaving in a way that benefits them, and what makes it easier for them to do so. Only on this basis should we define the more precise SBC approach and co-create and validate specific communication or interaction formats. It is important to build in opportunities to **monitor success** and to **test** the formats developed. After applying the SBC formats, there should be sufficient time to see how they work, so that further interventions can be developed and implemented if necessary to ensure that the desired behaviour is sustainably anchored and maintained.

→ See GIZ SBC Nutrition Guide and SBC lessons 2021 and the general GIZ SBC guide for more details

In the case of PD, the typical process is different and generally leaves the local groups in a driving and defining role instead of treating them as audiences or target groups. The first step is *for the community* to define the problem and the desired result. One difference is that no hypotheses are developed as to which behaviours are beneficial. Expert knowledge is set aside, which makes the approach open to innovative local (existing) solutions. For this, we need excellent facilitators who, instead of wanting to verify preconceived hypotheses, can go on a journey of **discovery and action** together with the community. The next step is to define how **positive deviants** can be found. Once they have been identified, the moderators help the local actors to determine which of the positive deviants' behaviours are unusual and contribute to the solution. The group then develops ideas on how the **new behaviours** identified can be **spread and disseminated** more widely. The approaches here can be many and varied (see below). Again, it is important for the community to monitor the results closely and to adapt or supplement actions as necessary.

→ See GIZ PD guide for more details



Figure 1: GIZ Positive Deviance Guide

We can continue to distinguish roughly between five different SBC approaches, which can each be used for the classic SBC way and for PD.

1. Informal action learning includes any direct interaction with/amongst audiences for learning and changing perceptions and behaviour.
2. Storytelling and edutainment can be drama series or entertaining documentary with appealing stories and role models to reach broader audiences who can change together with their main characters.
3. Campaigning can reach very broad audiences by any media to influence discourse and acceptance but may work less targeted and effective regarding specific audiences.
4. Nudging behaviour by influencing choice architecture and/or structuring the environment in a different way triggers the behaviour directly and does not necessarily change perceptions and intrinsic motivation.
5. Influencers may be traditional authorities, religious leaders, prominent people or social media influencers etc. who are willing to collaborate on respective SBC questions and can influence their audience.



## Examples

The following examples from the global programme show these different approaches in action.

Informal action learning was a main approach to identify positive deviants in India, introducing new practices for improved nutrition of small children. The project worked with selected communities to find families who had well-nourished children despite their low socioeconomic status. The communities discovered some unusual practices that some families adopted, and they decided through a validation process which practices were the most important.

A range of uncommon practices has been discovered in various areas: child nutrition and childcare, family nutrition, hygiene, nutrition gardens, the involvement of fathers in family nutrition and gender roles, as well as family values and related decision-making processes. Uncommon practices were for example:

- › The daughter-in-law eats together with the rest of the family rather than having to eat the leftovers afterwards (which is a common practice in rural families in India);
- › the father participates in household chores such as fetching water, feeding or bathing the child, buys vegetables and fruits when seasonal prices drop to ensure daily diversity, or buys an egg for the child instead of a packaged snack which costs the same;
- › the family waters their backyard garden with wastewater from the bathroom while other families say they cannot have a garden due to water scarcity.

→ See Bader & Reinbott 2025

To further expand these practices, the communities, with the help of adolescent girls living there, put together a traveling photo exhibition. This way, the practices could be shared with other communities. It encouraged them to reflect and talk about the practices and decide if they want to take them over.

Another example comes from Burkina Faso with the Husband Schools, in which men are encouraged to be included in the households life. Here, gender-transformative approaches were required alongside typical nutrition activities, such as improving knowledge about healthy diets and supporting sustainable agriculture practices.

→ See more at Husband Schools



Figure 2: Husband School in Burkina Faso



Figure 3: Let Me Tell You – Series from Zambia

An edutainment approach was chosen for raising awareness on good nutrition and hygiene amongst a broad audience of women, men and children in rural Zambia. To reach these target groups more easily and effectively, the project developed the animated series 'Let Me Tell You', in which various characters discuss nutrition and hygiene. To reach even more people, the series was also adapted into a comic book and a radio show. It was distributed on television and radio and is permanently available on YouTube. The comics were distributed to schools, among other places. Over 250,000 people were reached through these channels.

→ [Find the series here on YouTube](#)

In Malawi, a campaigning approach was chosen to diversify nutrition with eggs. The campaign aimed to normalize egg consumption as a vital part of the daily diet in rural areas. It used simple, clear messaging to communicate the health benefits of eggs and local chicken and relied on effective communication channels such as community meetings and mobile health messages. The project and its implementing partners also conducted regular monitoring visits to assess progress.

Among children aged 6 to 24 months (based on a 24-hour recall period), egg consumption among beneficiaries nearly tripled compared to the baseline (from 5 % to 14 %) and more than tripled in comparison to the control group (14 % vs. 4 %). Both increases are highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ), highlighting the effectiveness of the campaign. Although the overall consumption level remains relatively low, this is a notable improvement considering the socio-cultural barriers surrounding animal-source foods in the region. The sample size for this comparison was approximately 400 children ( $n \approx 200$  per group),



Figure 4: Egg Consumption by Children

making the findings statistically and programmatically relevant.

→ [Find more about the campaign here](#)



Figure 5: Examples for Tools in the Nudge Kits

In Cambodia, a nudging approach was adopted to help pregnant women, lactating women and caregivers improve the nutrition of children aged between six and 23 months. The project and its implementing partners developed 'Everyday Nudge Kits' based on qualitative research exploring current beliefs, perceptions, and environments that influence dietary choices. Various everyday objects that were available locally were selected and tested for their usability in several rounds. The most successful were integrated into the Nudge Kits and distributed to rural households. The kits included items such as a shopping bag, an egg box, a fruit basket, measuring cups, and a masher. The project continued to monitor the use of these kits, which showed promising signs of making a difference

→ [Find more about the nudge kits here](#)

An influencer approach was adopted in Ethiopia to help rural households improve the nutrition of mothers and their children under the age of two. To this end, the project worked with Mahlet Gebregiorgis, a well-known singer in. An entire campaign was developed to leverage the influence of the artist. The artist travelled to community events and schools to spread her messages in an entertaining way. This included a specially written song with messages about healthy eating and how to nourish children. The star was also present on posters, postcards and brochures to spread the messages. This allowed the project to reach a large number of people, who remembered the messages for a long time afterwards. However, such cooperation does not necessarily guarantee that influencers themselves are sufficiently convinced of the content and will continue to communicate in line with it in the future.

→ [Find more about the campaign here](#)



Figure 6: Singer Mahlet Gebregiorgis

# Lessons

## Project preparation

- › SBC played a central role in achieving the objectives of better nutrition in all partner countries. A SBC approach should always be considered.
- › If SBC is used, sufficient time and resources should be made available to bring about an effective change in attitudes and behaviours. Depending on its relevance, SBC should be a field of action with a similar amount of resources as the development of policies, institutions, markets or traditional education.
- › As indicated above, project preparation should not be confused with the necessary depth of SBC's analytical and emerging steps. The project proposal should, above all, ensure a robust process while leaving flexibility in the approaches and indicators to be chosen.
- › Sufficient resources (which ones) and time must be planned to achieve adequate targets/impact and to monitor them. However, great importance should be attached to this in order to 1) be able to adapt further measures for greater effectiveness and sustainability (adaptive management) and 2) credibly demonstrate to clients and partners the important role that SBC plays (reporting).
- › Furthermore, we and our partners should make greater use of the insights that SBC provides us about people in partner countries to shape policies, markets, educational opportunities, etc. that are more responsive to people's realities and thus more effective.
- › The environmental and climate crises, conflicts and economic crises can undermine SBC measures if, for example, new nutritional patterns can no longer be maintained as a result.

## Implementation

- › A purely knowledge-based approach is usually not enough to change people's attitudes and behaviours. Wherever people still have little awareness of healthy practices and are not convinced by new ideas, effective approaches are needed.
- › As more evidence of our impact accumulates, we are realising that for complex problems, the 'classic way' sometimes lacks contextual relevance or practicability. One example was recommending through the result model the consumption of 5 out of 10 food groups, even though rural communities in Madhya Pradesh (India) may not have year-round access to that many. The Positive Deviance approach shows us that the best solutions are often already intuitive practice amongst a few within communities. It requires facilitation rather than expertise to discover such solutions and empower communities to make them a new normal. Therefore, all SBC interventions should fundamentally consider whether PD might be a more effective route.

## SBC and food crises: Lesson from Zambia on lasting behaviour change

Drawing on experiences from Zambia, the programme has demonstrated that SBC can significantly contribute to strengthening community resilience — even under conditions of extreme crisis — when integrated in a participatory, context-sensitive and holistic manner. If good nutrition and hygiene practices are integrated into everyday life through participatory approaches, interactive learning methods and practical incentives, they persist even under difficult conditions. Complementary measures, such as promoting local food production or establishing savings and solidarity groups can further help people to maintain the new behaviours. Despite comparable levels of food insecurity, dietary diversification was significantly higher during and after food crises amongst beneficiaries compared to the control group. It demonstrates that the promoted behaviours were not only adapted in the short term but were sustainably integrated into everyday life.

## Conclusion

To fully unleash its potential, SBC must be seen and funded as a strategic field of action, not a side activity. This includes investing in SBC capacities, prioritizing monitoring and adaptation, and integrating SBC more systematically into project cycles.

With growing complexity, climate shocks, economic pressures and social transitions ahead, SBC is no longer a just 'nice to have' option. It is a critical lever for systemic change – and one of the most powerful tools we have to

support our partners in building a just, healthy and resilient future. Increasingly, progress on development goals depends on fundamental change towards new development pathways, such as the transformation of agricultural and food systems. The role that SBC can play in this is huge and has hardly been studied or applied yet. Social change of perceptions, values, attitudes, norms and behaviours for entire societies is possible. In the future, SBC in all its facets will have to play a major role in supporting such ambitions.



### Further links

[The Global Programme on Food and Nutrition Security, Enhanced Resilience](#)

[GIZ SBC Nutrition Guide and SBC lessons 2021](#)

[The general GIZ SBC guide](#)

[GIZ 2020: Transforming our work: Getting ready for transformational projects](#). Including: Chapter 2.4.2. 'The case for social change'

[GIZ PD guide](#)

[The Positive Deviance Collaborative](#)

[Data Powered Positive Deviance](#)

As a federally owned enterprise, GIZ supports the German Government in achieving its objectives in the field of international cooperation for sustainable development.

**Published by:**  
Deutsche Gesellschaft für  
Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

**Registered offices:**  
Bonn and Eschborn, Germany

Friedrich-Ebert-Allee 32+36	Dag-Hammarskjöld-Weg 1–5
53113 Bonn	65760 Eschborn
Germany	Germany
T +49 228 44 60-0	T +49 61 96 79-0
F +49 228 44 60-17 66	F +49 61 96 79-11 15

E [info@giz.de](mailto:info@giz.de)  
I [www.giz.de](http://www.giz.de)

**Programmes:**  
Global Programme Food and Nutrition Security,  
Enhanced Resilience

**Authors:**  
Daniel Kehrer,  
Susanne Schultz-Dopke

**Responsible:**  
Julia Kirya  
E [julia.kirya@giz.de](mailto:julia.kirya@giz.de)

**Photo credits:**  
GIZ/Arul Anand (p.1,4); GIZ/Conor Wall (p.2); GIZ/Kenya (p.3);  
GIZ/Pascal Somé (p.5); GIZ/Claudia Ruff (p.7)

**Layout:**  
kipconcept gmbh, Bonn

**URL links:**  
Responsibility for the content of external websites linked  
in this publication always lies with their respective publishers.  
GIZ expressly dissociates itself from such content.

GIZ is responsible for the content of this publication.

June 2025