

# Social marketing and behavioural change in a systems setting

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### Abstract

Most people recognise that everyday life is not the same as it was with climate change, a pandemic, inequalities and more. It is a world increasingly shaped by collective as well as individual choices, decisions and behaviours. Ultimately, in this complex world, the call to action is large-scale behaviour change. In response, social marketing with its behaviour change prime directive has been expanding in experience, evidence, theories and toolkits. Social marketing critically examines the interface of human and natural systems and their interconnected dynamic forces as a powerful means of influencing behaviours for the accorded transformation and betterment of individuals, communities, society and the planet. In pursuit of green deal innovations, critical trends in social marketing embrace systems science, stakeholder engagement and digital technologies.

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### Keywords

Behaviour change, Social marketing, Systems science, Stakeholders, Digital technologies.

### Introduction

Human behaviour accounts for approximately 1.0°C of global warming above preindustrial levels and calls for wide-scale behaviour change [9]. With human consumption of raw natural resources at the centre of the global-to-local green deals, systemic behaviour change and the rapid adoption of low-carbon lifestyles are critical enabling factors and therefore an ideal place for implementable interventions [32,29]. However,

although it is understood by scientists and policy makers that education and messaging have a role to play in creating sustainable consumption and a carbon-neutral world, communication alone does not result in people changing their behaviour, individually or collectively [5,19]. Increasingly, to address complex, multilevel, and multifaceted issues, such as climate change, healthy oceans and green cities, co-ordinated multilevel behaviour change among multiple stakeholders is required, including policy makers, regulators, governing organisations, media, stage agencies, scientists, corporations, community associations, social enterprises, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and citizens. Unlocking the value and impact of green deal innovation depends on changing numerous individual daily choices and decision points in a system setting [44,46]. Therefore, empowering multiple stakeholders, from citizens to policy makers, to change their behaviours over time is vital to achieve green deal innovations.

In response, social marketing, defined by its behavioural change remit over the past 50 years, is expanding its experience, evidence, theories and toolkits. The 2013 consensus definition of social marketing from the International Social Marketing Association, the European Social Marketing Association and the Australian Association of Social Marketing says, “Social Marketing seeks to develop and integrate marketing concepts with other approaches to influence behaviours that benefit individuals and communities for the greater social good ....It seeks to integrate research, best practice, theory, audience and partnership insight, to inform the delivery of competition sensitive and segmented social change programmes that are effective, efficient, equitable and sustainable” [21].

Social marketing knows that working ‘with’ people, not ‘for’ or ‘on’ behalf of people, to make sustainable behaviour changes clearly requires a more nuanced understanding of the social, cultural, behavioural and structural dynamics at work to influence consumption and production decision-making. This is not a ‘one-size-fits-all’ or population-level behavioural change intervention or campaign. Whether adapting to climate change, protecting our oceans, living in greener cities and ensuring healthy soils for healthy food, current social marketing trends include (1) social marketing and behaviour change in a systems setting [6,18,45], (2)

wider societal stakeholder engagement [22,31], and (3) the use of digital technologies beyond communication and promotion [37].

### Social marketing and behavioural change in a systems setting

Social marketing for systems-wide and transformative behaviour change adds three further guiding principles [26] to our understanding and implementation of behaviour change:

1. Uses a dynamic system thinking approach towards a problem (philosophical position)
2. It is a multimethod (methodological position)
3. It acknowledges multilevels of and places for disruption (action position).

To unlock the values and benefits from green innovations, these principles move the conceptualisation and management of behavioural change interventions from reductionist and linear paradigms to circular causation based on the evolutionary dynamics and feedbacks in a problem system where effects can become causes over time. Importantly, behaviour change can no longer be approached as an event or transaction confined to one single intervention at one single level at one point in time. Instead, change becomes a dynamic process over time across the individual, community and macro levels. The importance of the relational and interactive nature of behaviour change emerges, where individuals and a diverse array of top-down and bottom-up stakeholders are embedded in complex social systems with social mechanisms, such as co-operation, collaboration and self-organisation [13,24,25]. The processes cocreate and coengage multiple stakeholders in a problem system, all altering, modifying and adapting their behaviours for collective and collaborative impact. Together, the diverse array of divergent stakeholders converge on defining and articulating the problem using collective intelligence. Highly participatory behavioural design methodologies drive this type of behaviour change for social marketing [3,12,39,40,43,48] [41].

In practice, social marketing in a systems setting has emerged as systems 'social marketing' and 'macro-social marketing', for example, see Journal of Macromarketing special editions Marketing Systems (2019) and Macro-Social Marketing (2018). For green innovations, a significant benefit of systems-led behaviour change is that it adds 'social systems' and 'social mechanisms' to environmental and health problems. A second significant strength lies in understanding the behavioural dynamics at work, or not, for different groups or segments in a focal system. This systemic broadening, conceptual and empirical, spans multiple stakeholders at multiple levels of behaviour and analysis: micro (individual-

level), meso (dyadic and communities and networks), and macro (governments, policy and societies) [27,28]. The dynamics of behaviour change demanded by green innovations is not the product of individual aggregation but dependent on the continuous interactions of small, engaged groups of individuals and wider stakeholders.

Reflecting this multilevel and systemic behaviour change relating to Oceans and Human Health, Britton et al., [7] present this new way of understanding dynamics and interrelationships with the ocean and humanising environmental crises. The presence of heterogeneous subpopulations and stakeholders with different values within a problem system shows optimal implementation of evidence-based strategies is through targeted value-based exchanges for sustainable change. The study also demonstrates the value of a highly participatory collective intelligence process through a meta-analysis of priorities and actions for sustainable ocean policy. The findings highlight the priority themes and actions from expert stakeholder *and* citizen discussions that provide key insights for policy and decision-making processes. The soft systems dynamics-behavioural change presented provides one methodology to uncover the circular causality and interdependent processes visible. For green innovations, understanding the behavioural and structural dynamic interactions can help accelerate the progress of policy and management that is integrated and adaptive. The value is in building capacity to understand the current and future synergies and interlinkages between climate change, ocean health and human health and well-being.

In a similar vein, [2] demonstrate the action benefits for green innovation of a social marketing systems behaviour change perspective when the focus of change is expanded beyond an individual to include factors in social, economic, and policy environments to explain eating behaviours in the Australian Military Personnel. On the *supply* side, the encouragement of patronage through menu innovation, investment in facilities, cooking skills training, and auditing provision emerged as opportunities for behaviour change. On the *demand* side, education and training coupled with communications that challenge cultural and regulatory norms and link to military values were the dominant behaviour change areas.

In the health domain, a final exemplar comes from the Florida and Community Based Prevention Marketing for Systems Change—a partnership to identify, tailor, implement and evaluate a multilevel intervention to increase colorectal cancer (CRC) screening in the Tampa Bay region. Their innovative academic-community strategy to manage the complex problem of CRC screening disparities made use of group model building, a concept core to social marketing systems

thinking, to understand the importance of linkages, feedback loops, and interactions among the system's stakeholders over time. Group model building is a highly participatory and successful way of involving community participants and other stakeholders in problem definition to intervention design and implementation [3]. It delivers behavioural design methodologies for behavioural change highly relevant to green innovations.

### Wider societal stakeholder engagement

Studies have shown that citizens, consumers and communities are no longer isolated or independent entities in either individual or collective change processes but collaborative, co-ordinated and interrelated stakeholders with a shared change focus [15,18]. Another important factor in behaviour change is giving voice and space to a diversity of stakeholders, including those involved in local governance, regulation media, community organisations, NGOs, social enterprises, commercial activities and environmental advocacy. This is 'whole-systems-in-the-room' change, emphasising top-down, bottom-up connections and the cocreation of shared and interlocking values among all stakeholders in a localised context. It assembles top-down/bottom-up, micro-, meso- and macro-levels stakeholders (e.g. representatives of industry, professional associations, consumer and civil associations, leadership positions, decision-makers, etc.) and cross-sectoral approaches (e.g. industrial sectors, local authorities and agencies and NGOs, including citizen associations and environmental organisations) that bring together different groups of people to enact change. Two examples of societal stakeholder identification and engagement demonstrate the benefits for of green deal innovations.

A new and timely book, *Stakeholder Involvement in Social Marketing Challenges and Approaches to Engagement* edited by Knox et al. [22], is unique in the discussion on stakeholder involvement in social marketing. It addresses the calls made by scholars to take up inherent challenges involved in identifying, involving, and prioritising different stakeholders in behaviour change interventions. Sharing real-world experiences, the text synthesises and extends current knowledge and contributes to establishing stronger and long-lasting alliances with stakeholders with the aim of further supporting and facilitating sustainable change. Different issues affecting stakeholder involvement in social marketing range from partnerships with nature rather than multi-national corporations (MNCs), ethical tension and conflict between various groups to case studies on active travel and reducing health and well-being inequalities, all highly pertinent to green deal innovations.

Advancing the practical application of stakeholder knowledge in social marketing, McHugh et al., [31] contribute seven stakeholder protocols, a set of

practices, tools and activities. The aim is to ensure that stakeholder deliberations are not restricted to only those who are aware or have a vested stake in the problem but include a broader set of market shapers [16]. Furthermore, the protocols can assist in the identification of nonidentified stakeholders, leading to better outcomes and building collaborative places and spaces for greater impact, reach, and ultimately sustainable wide-scale behaviour change.

### Using digital technologies beyond communication and promotion

Research is also progressing as social marketing witnesses the acceleration and normalisation of digital technologies for behaviour change [20,11,23]. A systematic literature review by Shawky et al. [37] examining the use of interactive social media and engagement in various social marketing programmes using interactive social media platforms, points to the scale of integration of digital technologies in social marketing, is clearly expanding beyond communication and promotion.

Studies such as by Andrade et al., Ullmann et al. and Shah et al. [1,33,36] highlight the expansion of digital technologies into research, segmentation and targeting purposes in social marketing. Other studies such as [4,35,47] developed behavioural change apps, products and services and use digital technologies for delivery purposes [8,17,34].

Specific technologies used include Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, Internet and mobile phones/smart-phones, text messaging, mobile, websites, online programmes, blogs, discussion boards, apps, virtual reality and emails for segmentation, formative research, barrier and asset analysis, augmented/online products and service facilitation, delivery and access and monitoring intervention engagement. Such digital technologies pave the way for multilevel, multistakeholder interactions and collaborations to take place that can fuel systems change. These digital technologies unlock positive behavioural change outcomes for green deal innovations in numerous ways. Digital technologies facilitate diversity of self-organisation, connect top-down decision-makers with bottom-up citizen and community lived experiences, reframe old self-interest values into new shared values based on mutuality and morality and facilitate and nurture co-operation and collaboration for collaborative impact in local-to-global contexts. In effect, digital technologies in social marketing drive the macro-meso-micro-micro-meso-macro social mechanisms in social systems.

There is a small but accelerating body of literature that shows digital technologies are central to supporting funders, stakeholders and partnerships in designing and

implementing behavioural change programmes [1,10,14,30]. Under the hood of behavioural change, augmenting the digital technologies mentioned earlier, are digital tools such as google docs, zoom, Microsoft teams are being used as indispensable tools for stakeholder collaboration, co-ordination, communication, engagement and self-organisation, that in turn, can give rise to long-term strategic and operational change partnerships. These digital platforms help stakeholders move away from their siloed mental models of a problem to more complex, collective mental models of problem systems. System dynamic and simulation software such as Stella, Venism and Kumu can assist in mapping and model the casual loops, feedbacks and leverage points in a focal system. Stakeholders can engage with the complexity of the problem, the different perspectives, and competing demands; uncover hitherto unseen solutions; and initiate cross-sector partnership opportunities. From this perspective, systems-wide behaviour change becomes a process, a co-created macro-micro process. Behaviour change is codiscovered, codiagnosed and codesigned, embracing the citizen ‘and’ stakeholders, the citizen ‘and’ society, the citizen ‘and’ the planet.

Finally, in relation to communication and promotion, an important technological trend is the use of multiagent systems to model opinion leaders and interactions, showing that targeted advertising through digital social networks performs better than a traditional population-level broadcasting approach [42]. Furthermore, such narrow and broadcasting highlights how the environmental and/or health objectives of some stakeholders in a system compete with the economic, social, political and cultural goals of other stakeholders. This is a reminder to social marketers that stakeholders have multiple choices or decision points and can be direct or indirect competition actively pushing in the opposite direction of other stakeholders in the system. For example, organisations focused solely on terrestrial issues, ensuring the status quo and continued existence of existing fossil fuel sectors or the tobacco industry resisting smoking cessation [5,19].

## Conclusion

The value and impact of Social Marketing for Green Deal Innovations lies in its strong ability to design and deliver behaviour change interventions and strategies at multiple levels across multiple and diverse stakeholders. This review points to social marketing broadening its focus beyond the individual change in both the health and environmental domains to ways that drive wide-scale behaviour changes from a systems perspective. The unit of analysis for transformative behaviour change becomes the interactions, processes, mechanisms and interdependencies, as opposed to facts, variables and levels. Social marketing, using highly participatory

systemic cocreation methods, societal stakeholder engagement and digital technologies can contribute a transformative and far-reaching framework in the interests of sustainable societies and planet.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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- \* of special interest
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