

# MOVING FORWARD SOCIAL NORMS THEORY AND PRACTICE

## AN INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE

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### SOCIAL NORMS AND AGENCY LEARNING COLLABORATIVES (LCS)

Social Norms and Agency Learning Collaboratives (LCS) are four regional networks with a mission to strengthen research and practice on social norms, gender and agency by building a network of practitioners, researchers, evaluators, and advocates who share knowledge, generate evidence, and develop resources to support social and behavior change (SBC) programming. Critical Conversations, i.e. webinars that address cutting edge social norms issues, organized around a series of provocative questions are one way of fulfilling this mission. This blog summarizes the third session of critical conversations hosted by the Learning Collaborative Network on January 23, 2024, which focused on interdisciplinary perspectives on social norms including perspectives from political science, public health, and practice.

#### Motivating questions for this conversation included:

- What have we learned from this journey and to what extent are these insights informing social science theory?
- What do different disciplines bring to social norms theory, measurement and practice?
- How can we ensure that real world experience informs the way we conceptualize social norms and design norms shifting approaches?

Our conversation was kicked off by brief comments from an interdisciplinary panel of disruptive, forward thinking researchers, policy makers, and practitioners including: [Osasuyi Dirisu](#), Executive Director at the Policy Innovation Centre and Senior Fellow at the Nigerian Economic Summit Group, [Ellen Lust](#), Professor in the Department of Political Science and founding director of the Governance and Local Development Institute (GLD) at the University of Gothenburg, and [Rajiv Rimal](#), Professor in the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg

School of Public Health. The panel was moderated by [Caroline Harper](#), Principal Research Fellow and Director of Gender Equality and Social Inclusion at the Overseas Development Institute whose work on social norms has greatly influenced the field (e.g. [progress report on social norms change](#), [impact of discriminatory social norms on adolescent girls' development](#)).

The panel addressed several aspects of social norms work in their fields including how it defines social norms and how social norms are measured — a question frequently asked by Learning Collaborative members. The panelists also shared examples from their own work of how they incorporated and measured norms.

## DEFINITION OF SOCIAL NORMS

All three panelists agreed that social norms involve expectations about behaviors within a group or community. They acknowledged that social norms influence individual actions and decisions through social pressure or sanctions. And each recognized that social norms are context-specific and vary across different communities and situations.



### THE SOCIAL NORMS ATLAS

Understanding global social norms and related concepts  
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**Dr. Rimal** discussed the social psychological perspective of social norms which emphasizes perceptions, distinguishing between descriptive norms (what people do) and injunctive norms (what people think others should do). He highlighted the role of communication and social interactions in disseminating and reinforcing norms, and the factors that influence normative behavior.

**Dr. Lust** emphasized the institutional and rule-based nature of norms, viewing them as part of broader social and political institutions, but also mentioning the importance of interrogating assumptions and examining how norms vary across different communities and institutions.

**Dr. Dirisu** mentioned the importance of social norms theory that influenced her work, but also a wide range of others including theories of gender, power, poverty, and charity. Dr. Dirisu focused additional attention on the importance of examining gender norms across the spectrum of genders and with an intersectional perspective.

**Collectively, the panelists acknowledged the value of integrating insights from other disciplines to enhance their understanding and approach to social norms.**

## SOCIAL NORMS MEASUREMENT

Across panelists, there was consensus in the use of multiple methods. All three panelists employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to measure social norms, such as surveys, focus groups, and ethnographic studies. All panelists also emphasized the importance of understanding the specific context in which social norms operate. They recognize that norms are deeply embedded in the social, cultural, and institutional fabric of communities. All panelists also measured both the perceptions of norms (what people think others do and approve of) and actual behaviors to understand the influence of norms on actions.



### RESOURCES FOR MEASURING SOCIAL NORMS

A Practical Guide for Program Implementers  
[View the document here.](#)

**Dr. Dirisu** mentioned the importance of exploratory research to understand behaviors and the interactions between norms before moving to measurement. This involves qualitative methods to uncover the nuances of social norms. Her approach often includes a specific focus on gender norms and the ethical implications of changing these norms.

**Dr. Lust** centers her work on understanding social norms within the framework of institutions and rules. She uses focus group discussions and surveys to explore how norms vary across different communities and activities.

**Dr. Rimal** focuses on the perceptual aspects of social norms, distinguishing between descriptive norms and injunctive norms, measuring both since it is essential to understand and address misalignments, which is where behavior change is more likely. He uses surveys to measure these perceptions. Ultimately, his approach includes the use of behavioral experiments to understand how changes in perceptions can influence behavior.

## SOCIAL NORMS WORK IN PRACTICE

### Dr. Dirisu

Dr. Dirisu emphasized the importance of the interplay of theory and practice. For example, understanding structural barriers when working on social norms affecting health. She also emphasized that social norms change organically within communities and highlighting the need for community-driven strategies.



#### **"I THINK THIS IS THE ONLY CHALLENGE... THE STIGMA"**

Stakeholder perceptions about barriers to Antenatal care (ANC) and Prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) uptake in Kano state, Nigeria

[View the document here.](#)

### Dr. Rimal

Dr. Rimal highlighted that social norms guide behavior, but individuals are not entirely driven by norms. Factors promoting or inhibiting norms operate at multiple levels (individual, social, environmental), but in essence, Dr. Rimal mentioned that there are two pathways to change behaviors: changing the norms themselves or changing intermediate factors that affect whether the norms affect behavior.



#### **A RE-EXPLICATION OF SOCIAL NORMS, TEN YEARS LATER**

[View the document here.](#)

### Dr. Lust

As a political scientist, Dr. Lust focuses on who has the power to change expectations and behaviors, such as traditional or state authorities. Efforts often aim to change people's beliefs about what others believe, rather than changing the norms themselves, although from the social psychological perspective this would be considered norms change since perceptions are norms.



#### **FEMALE REPRESENTATION AND LEGITIMACY**

Evidence from a harmonized experiment in Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia

[View the document here.](#)

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Early in the discussion, Dr. Dirisu stressed the ethical implications of social norms intervention including potential unintended consequences, and the need to critically evaluate the power dynamics involved in efforts to transform norms. Collectively, several considerations or implications were raised including the risk that local voices could be missing, for example, academics often do not engage directly in norm change, leading to a lack of local voices in research and programming. Further, assumptions made by Global North researchers may not align with local realities and concerns were raised about whose norms were being addressed and who has the authority to change them. One way to avoid this pitfall is to work directly with community members to design interventions “together” instead of designing social norms “for” communities as well as recognizing that social norms change organically and communities are the drivers of this process. Fundamentally, deeply understanding local contexts and potential unintended consequences are essential to avoid harm that can come from social norms work.

## MOVING FORWARD

The conversation ended with discussion about future research directions providing a roadmap for advancing the field of social norms. The panelists emphasized the need for a dynamic and collaborative approach to advancing social norms theory and practice. It is our hope that this conversation will be/was? a catalyst for such collaborative effort.

### Future Research Directions

1. **Normative Influence:** Focus on understanding what promotes or inhibits normative influence.
2. **Measurement:** Develop better methods to measure social institutions and their impact.
3. **Environmental Factors:** Explore the interaction between social norms and broader environmental determinants of behavior.
4. **Ethics and Unintended Consequences:** Address ethical considerations and potential unintended consequences of social norms interventions.

### Future Directions in Theory and Practice

1. **Integration of Theory and Practice:**
  - Ensure practical experiences continuously inform theoretical frameworks.
  - Maintain clear linkages and opportunities for cross-learning between theory and practice.
2. **Continued Engagement and Interest:**
  - Encourage ongoing interest and engagement in the topic of social norms.
  - Highlight the importance of bringing together diverse voices and perspectives to enrich the discussion.