

Chapter One:

The Theory of Planned Behaviour: A Framework for Decolonising Strategic Communication in Development and Humanitarian Contexts

Frameworks



Local Partnerships



Community Voices



**Localising Communication
Beyond Translation, Toward
Ownership.**

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Introduction

From adopting insecticide-treated mosquito nets to practicing recycling, human behaviour often resists the logic of information. Despite decades of awareness campaigns and educational interventions, knowledge alone has rarely translated into sustained behavioural change. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), proposed by Icek Ajzen (1991), has become one of the most enduring attempts to explain this gap between knowing & doing.

Behaviour as the Heart of Communication:

At the core of development and humanitarian communication lies a deceptively simple question:

Why do people act the way they do?

This chapter revisits the TPB through a communication lens—examining its conceptual evolution, its operational value in field contexts, and its limitations when applied across cultural and political boundaries. Drawing on six case studies—from malaria prevention in Uganda to environmental citizenship in Ecuador—it argues that TPB, while powerful, requires reimagining through a decolonial lens that restores agency, context, and relational meaning to human action.

Conceptual Foundations

The TPB emerged as an evolution of the *Theory of Reasoned Action* (TRA), formulated by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) to explain volitional behaviour. The TRA proposed that two factors predict behavioural intention: **attitude** (the individual's evaluation of the behaviour) and **subjective norms** (perceived social pressure to perform or not perform the behaviour).

Yet, real-world evidence revealed a missing element—many people intend to act but are hindered by structural or situational constraints. Ajzen (1991) resolved this by introducing perceived behavioural control (PBC)—the perceived ease or difficulty of performing a behaviour. The TPB thus posits that intention, and by extension behaviour, is determined by the interplay of three variables:

Attitude toward the behaviour

Beliefs about the outcomes and evaluations of those outcomes.

Subjective norms

Beliefs about others' expectations and motivation to comply.

Perceived behavioural control

Perceived capacity or resources to act.

TPB's conceptual elegance lies in its ability to translate these variables into measurable constructs, allowing both prediction and intervention.

This triadic framework has since become a cornerstone in strategic communication, offering a blueprint for designing campaigns that link message framing to psychological levers of change (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Fishbein and Ajzen, 2010).

Applying Theory of Planned behaviour in development & Humanitarian Communication

01

Promoting Health Behaviours in Uganda

In rural Uganda, the fight against malaria revealed the communicative essence of TPB. Perkins et al. (2019) found that while the majority of households used insecticide-treated nets, many believed their peers did not. This misperception weakened subjective norms, reducing motivation. Health campaigns reframed messages from warnings to affirmations—“most families here sleep under nets every night”—transforming prevention into a symbol of community identity. By aligning normative perception with reality, communicators activated intention through belonging, demonstrating TPB’s power to connect cognition with culture.

02

HIV Testing & Empowerment in Ethiopia

In Addis Ababa, Mirkuzie et al. (2011) applied TPB to women’s decisions to undergo HIV testing during antenatal care. The strongest predictor of testing intention was subjective norm—what women believed their partners, peers, or healthcare providers expected. Yet, this raised ethical concerns: normative influence risked coercing rather than empowering. Communication strategies evolved to emphasize voluntary choice and informed consent, illustrating how TPB can reveal the moral boundaries of persuasion in humanitarian health communication.

03

Contraceptive Communication in Rural Uganda

Kiene et al. (2013) demonstrated TPB’s diagnostic precision in explaining contraceptive use. Positive attitudes alone did not predict behaviour; social disapproval and low perceived control (due to male dominance and limited clinic access) suppressed intention. Development campaigns reframed family planning through collective values—health, protection, and prosperity—thereby strengthening normative support while expanding perceived control via mobile clinics and counselling. TPB here guided communicators to design contextually embedded, gender-sensitive messages.

04

Communication Accountability in Development Organizations

Buhmann and Brønn (2018) turned the TPB inward, using it to predict communication professionals’ intention to evaluate their own campaigns. They found that practitioners’ evaluation behaviour depended more on organizational norms and control beliefs than personal attitudes. This insight reframes institutional accountability as a behavioural system: communication cultures must foster shared expectations and practical capacity for reflection. TPB thus serves as a tool not only for audience research but for internal capacity-building in humanitarian organizations.

Lessons and theoretical insights

05

Media Discourse and Genetically Modified Foods in China

Li and Bautista (2020) used TPB to explore public resistance to genetically modified (GM) foods. Their study found that subjective norms—particularly family and peer influence—outweighed individual attitudes. Public distrust in institutional media eroded perceived control, as citizens felt unable to make informed choices. This case underscored TPB’s communicative dimension: behaviour is mediated not just by belief but by the credibility of the communicative environment. Trust, not truth alone, drives behavioural intention.

06

Environmental Citizenship in Ecuador

In Ecuador’s Guayas Province, Hidalgo-Crespo and Amaya-Rivas (2024) examined pro-environmental behaviours. Attitudes toward recycling were strong, but sustained action emerged only when normative identity and control structures aligned. Campaigns that framed waste reduction as “a shared civic duty” transformed sustainability into collective pride, while improved infrastructure strengthened control beliefs. TPB thus illuminated the mechanics of civic transformation—how communication can make sustainable behaviour feel both normal and possible.

Lessons and Theoretical Insights

Across these six case studies, several insights crystallize.

First, behaviour change requires communicative alignment between *belief, belonging, and capacity*. Each TPB component represents not a variable but a narrative space where meaning is constructed: attitudes are stories about value, norms are stories about identity, and control is a story about agency.

Second, TPB reveals that the most effective humanitarian communication is **relational, not transactional**. Messages succeed when they situate the individual within a web of mutual expectation and shared purpose.

Third, the theory’s **diagnostic utility** is unmatched: it enables practitioners to locate the point of behavioural friction—whether attitudinal resistance, normative conflict, or lack of control—and design targeted responses.

Yet, the case studies also expose the model’s boundaries. Behavioural intention is often thwarted by conditions that TPB cannot fully explain: poverty, gender hierarchies, colonial legacies, or state neglect. In such cases, failure to act is not a cognitive deficit but a structural reality. This reveals the need for a broader communicative ethics—one that situates intention within systems of power.

Critiques and the Path Toward Decolonisation

Core Limitations of TPB

Overemphasis on rationality

Cultural constraints

Emotional blind spots

The intention–behaviour gap

Toward a Decolonised TPB

Reframe subjective norms as communal ethics

Reconceptualize perceived control as structural capacity

Methodological decolonisation

Epistemic reflexivity

From behavioural engineering to relational understanding



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The Theory of Planned Behaviour has earned its longevity by offering both clarity and versatility. It gives communicators a scaffold for designing, diagnosing, and evaluating behavioural interventions with empirical precision. Yet, as the global case studies reveal, its continued relevance depends on its ability to evolve.

In the context of development and humanitarian communication, TPB's true potential lies not in predicting behaviour but in facilitating reflection—helping practitioners see where belief meets structure, where intention meets inequality, and where communication becomes the architecture of collective action.

A decolonised TPB, attuned to culture and power, transforms communication from persuasion to participation. It invites a more just and dialogic practice—one that listens before it speaks, co-creates before it intervenes, and recognizes that every act of behaviour change is, at its core, an act of relationship. In this book chapter, I explore this topic in detail and will share a link to the book upon its launch.