Adopting a behavioural science lens in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's technology and innovation investments

A portfolio review

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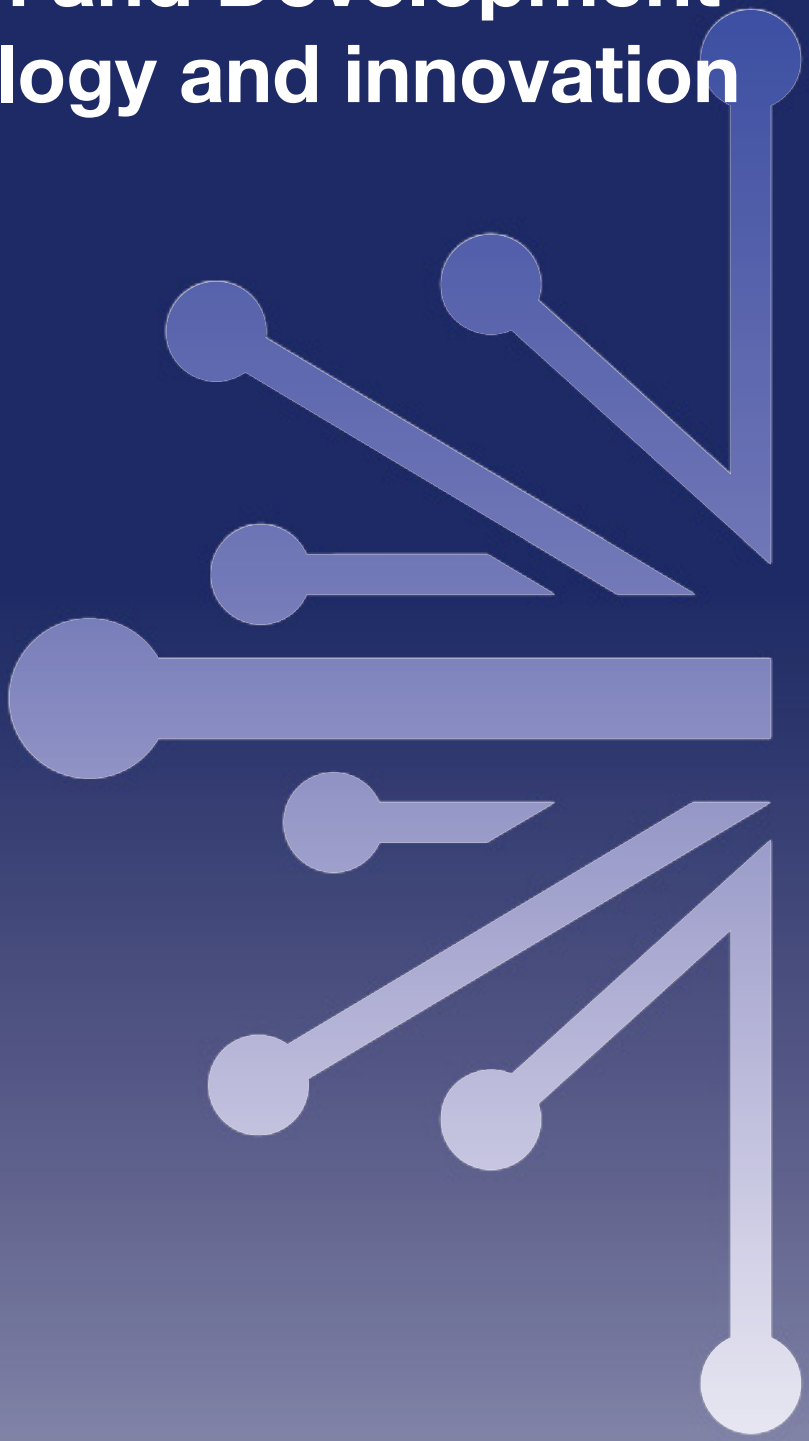

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Executive Summary

Background and Purpose

The Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) recognises the transformative potential of technology and innovation in advancing sustainable development across low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). However, despite technical soundness, many promising interventions underperform due to human and social factors, including entrenched social norms, behavioural biases, and insufficient alignment with local contexts. The Research Commissioning Centre (RCC), in collaboration with the Technology and Innovation Unit (TIU), commissioned this comprehensive review to explore how behavioural science can enhance the effectiveness of technological interventions within the FCDO portfolio.

This portfolio review addresses a critical gap in understanding where and how behavioural science is currently applied across TIU's technology and innovation investments, identifies barriers to systematic implementation, and develops practical tools to support more consistent integration of behavioural insights into programme design and delivery.

Methodology and Scope

The review employed a rigorous mixed-methods approach designed to balance methodological rigour with practical utility. A rapid literature review established a foundational framework of applied behavioural science, identifying eight core components: evidence review, problem definition, monitoring and evaluation, diagnosis, intervention design, co-design, implementation, and expertise integration. This framework served as the analytical foundation for subsequent portfolio assessment.

Twenty key informant interviews were conducted with grantees representing diverse programmes across seven hubs within the TIU ecosystem: Transform, AI4D, GSMA, Global Innovation Fund, Global Disability Innovation Hub, Co-Labs, and Frontier Technologies. Each interview was analysed as a discrete case study using systematic dot mapping techniques to assess the presence, absence, and quality of behavioural science integration across the component framework.

The research process incorporated participatory workshops with FCDO teams and grantees, alongside validation by an external advisory group comprising distinguished experts from academia and industry. This iterative approach ensured findings were empirically grounded, operationally relevant, and externally credible.

Key Findings

The portfolio review revealed that engagement with behavioural science occurs across projects in varied ways, though its application remains uneven and often shaped by contextual constraints rather than systematic integration. Evidence reviews were commonly undertaken, though these typically focused on user understanding rather than systematically mapping behavioural drivers. Problem definition was generally recognised as important, with many grantees drawing on contextual and user needs assessments, but behavioural perspectives were less frequently employed, particularly where solutions had already been developed.

Monitoring, evaluation, and learning activities were widely implemented, with formative approaches such as piloting and feasibility studies representing common practice. However, behavioural MEL approaches, including the use of behavioural Theories of Change, were less frequent, though well-executed when supported by specialist partners. Diagnosis using structured behavioural frameworks was not typically a formal requirement, with many grantees reporting challenges related to time, resources, and expertise. Where diagnostic tools such as COM-B or barriers analysis were applied by specialists, they provided valuable insights to guide programme design.

Intervention design processes often incorporated behavioural ideas informally or retrospectively, whilst structured behavioural approaches were less common. Co-design with end users was recognised as highly valuable, though often limited to validation due to resource constraints. Implementation strategies predominantly focused on technical and operational aspects of scaling, with behavioural considerations less commonly foregrounded. Access to behavioural science expertise was typically sought in targeted ways, often from external specialists, though affordability and accessibility remained significant challenges.

The analysis identified strong enthusiasm among stakeholders for more methodical application of behavioural science, particularly when supported by accessible tools and clear guidance. Many grantees could retrospectively identify where behavioural approaches might have strengthened their projects, suggesting significant potential for enhanced impact through better integration of behavioural insights.

Strategic Opportunities and Recommendations

The review established clear priorities for embedding behavioural science more systematically across the portfolio. Problem definition, diagnosis, and intervention design emerged as high-priority components where behavioural science offers distinctive and complementary value beyond existing disciplinary approaches. Implementation was identified as medium-high priority, whilst evidence review, MEL, and co-design were recognised as medium priorities, though all components were considered valuable for strengthening innovation outcomes.

Short-term recommendations focus on establishing foundational capabilities through piloting practical tools and creating institutional expectations. FCDO should lead by example in piloting the developed Toolkit and Triage tools across selected hubs, whilst establishing early expectations that behavioural science should be considered at programme design stages. Hubs should trial these tools in live funding calls and begin developing internal champions ('Sherpas') who can provide light-touch guidance and connect behavioural science to day-to-day delivery.

Medium-term strategies emphasise building supportive infrastructure and embedded capabilities. FCDO should create accessible expert advisory mechanisms, invest in tailored training programmes, and convene communities of practice to enable peer-to-peer learning. Hubs should embed behavioural science into application and reporting templates, formalise Sherpa roles, and share learning through case studies that demonstrate strengthened impact.

Long-term institutional reforms focus on sustainability and systematic integration. FCDO should reform funding structures to enable greater flexibility and iteration, integrate behavioural science principles into wider innovation frameworks, and embed behavioural considerations into organisational norms and policies. Hubs should establish behavioural science as core organisational culture, partner with FCDO on evaluation approaches that measure behavioural outcomes, and continue innovating through new tool formats and delivery mechanisms

Developed Assets and Implementation Pathway

Two key prototypes were developed and validated through stakeholder engagement: a Triage tool that provides decision-support for identifying projects where behavioural science offers greatest marginal value, and a comprehensive Toolkit that offers practical guidance structured around four user-friendly categories which are aligned with entrepreneurial language and innovation practices.

The Triage tool serves as a rapid screening mechanism to help funders and grant-makers assess behavioural dependencies that underpin project success. It guides reviewers to examine whether proposed interventions require fundamental behavioural changes from system actors or end users, and whether assumptions about such changes are grounded in credible evidence.

The Toolkit reframes the eight-component behavioural science model into four action-oriented categories: Self-awareness and Market Awareness, Insight and Validation, Co-creation and Design, and Execution and Growth. This approach employs the vocabulary of start-ups and innovation rather than academic terminology, making behavioural science more accessible and directly actionable for grantees.

Both tools were designed as foundational building blocks requiring adaptation to individual hub and programme contexts, rather than standardised solutions. Piloting with willing stakeholders will serve to refine content and format whilst generating evidence about optimal embedding within hub processes and grant-making practices.

Conclusion and Strategic Impact

This review demonstrates tremendous potential to strengthen FCDO's technology and innovation portfolio through systematic application of behavioural science. The research reveals genuine enthusiasm across hubs, grantees, and FCDO teams for practical approaches that enhance problem definition, diagnosis, and intervention design. The developed Toolkit and Triage prototypes provide immediate entry points for translating this enthusiasm into actionable practice.

The evidence base establishes a clear window of opportunity to move from fragmented application to standardized practice, embedding behavioural science as a shared capability across the innovation ecosystem. Through phased implementation of recommendations, supported by practical tools and institutional commitment, behavioural science can transition from under-utilised resource to core enabler of effective, inclusive, and sustainable innovation.

This transformation will strengthen FCDO's global leadership in innovation whilst ensuring funded programmes deliver enhanced impact, value for money, and developmental outcomes across low- and middle-income countries. The systematic integration of behavioural insights represents a strategic investment in more effective technological interventions that are better aligned with human realities and local contexts, ultimately advancing the FCDO's mission of reducing poverty and promoting sustainable development.