

# Design for Sustainable Change

Executive Summary | 2017

## **Context**

Using behavioural insights is increasingly common in sustainable policies worldwide. Compared with laws and regulations, behavioural policy instruments offer less intrusive pathways to achieve behaviour change. For example, informing energy-inefficient households about the average consumption of their neighbours can lead to improvements – simply caused by the elicited tension to conform with the social norm. Although effective in the short term, policies that rely on such external incentives may lack strength to achieve lasting outcomes.

## **Approach**

Considering evidence on motivation and behaviour, we looked into how policies can catalyse and harness internally-driven motivation in sustainable behaviours including charitable giving, energy saving, and recycling. We hypothesised that messages deliberately emphasizing individuals' freedom of choice, while providing a rationale for sustainable behaviour, can function as an intrinsic incentive to act in the prosocial way. To test this, we carried out a randomised controlled trial comparing the effectiveness of social norms as an extrinsic incentive to supporting individual autonomy as the intrinsic mechanism.

## **Insights**

Individuals who received messages that encouraged autonomy showed a 6% increase in how they valued the activity of sustainable habits. Those who placed a higher value on these behaviours were also more likely to be more engaged with the practice. They also had modestly higher mental well-being. Conversely, using messages containing social norms did not yield any change in perceived value of the promoted sustainable behaviours.

## **Recommendations**

Policies that promote public-spirited actions should focus on harnessing intrinsic drivers of behaviour rather than external incentives. One way to raise internal motivation towards sustainability is to use autonomy supportive communication, consisting of three elements: (1) providing a rationale of the promoted action, (2) using a non-controlling language, and (3) acknowledging negative feelings associated with changing habits. Implementing such communication strategy to policy requires minimal resources, yet it can meaningfully catalyse individuals' intrinsic engagement in prosocial practices.