

ISM Matter of Focus Guide

The ISM is a tool developed by the Scottish Government, designed for policy makers and practitioners whose work ultimately aims at engaging people and influencing their behaviours in order to deliver improved outcomes.

ISM is based on ‘moving beyond the individual’ to consider all the contexts that shape people’s behaviours – the Individual, the Social and the Material.

At Matter of Focus we use this approach to help people understand the factors that will be important in the delivery of a range of programmes, from healthcare improvement, to creativity with young children.

The ISM toolkit has a focus on environmental behaviours¹. In our guide to the ISM here, we explain the concepts for a more general audience interested in understanding the context for any people-based social programme.

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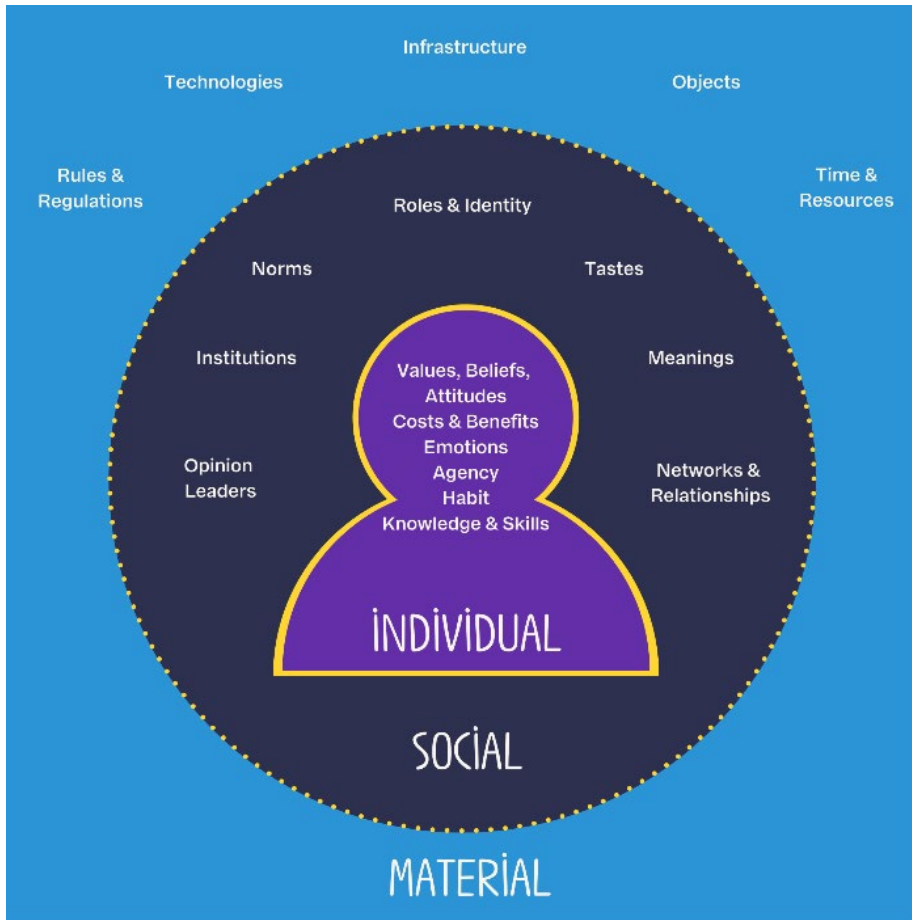
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¹ See the original full guide here: <https://www.gov.scot/Publications/2013/06/8511/downloads>

Introduction to the ISM



THE INDIVIDUAL CONTEXT

This includes the factors held by the individual that affect the choices and the behaviours he or she undertakes, such as an individual's values, attitudes and skills, as well as the calculations he/she makes before acting, including personal evaluations of costs and benefits. (Page 3).

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

This includes the factors that exist beyond the individual in the social realm, yet shape people's behaviours. These influences include understandings that are shared amongst groups, such as social norms and the meanings attached to activities, as well as people's networks and relationships, and the institutions that influence how groups of individuals behave. (Page 4).

THE MATERIAL CONTEXT

This includes the factors that are 'out there' in the environment and wider world, which both constrain and shape behaviour. These influences include existing 'hard' infrastructures, technologies and regulations, as well as other 'softer' influences such as time and the schedules of everyday life. (Page 5).

INDIVIDUAL FACTORS THAT SHAPE BEHAVIOUR

Values, Beliefs, Attitudes: The basic elements of an individual's motivational system, moving from the most abstract and broad based values (e.g. pursuit of wealth or power), through beliefs or more particular worldviews (e.g. that people should work together to improve society) to attitudes, which are individual's views on specific things such as objects, activities or other people (e.g. people should care for their elderly relatives).

Costs & Benefits: The cost/benefit calculation is the basic method of decision-making, in which the perceived benefits (or 'utility') of acting are weighed against the perceived costs of doing so, including non-monetary costs such as time (e.g. deciding whether the anxiety of asking for help will be worth it in terms of potential help that might be received).

Emotions: How people feel about something – their emotional response – is one aspect in their behavioural decision making (e.g. fear, guilt or apathy). Some theories contrast 'hot' evaluations, based on emotions, with 'cold' evaluations, based on attitudes and rational choice.

Agency: Agency relates to self-control and a person's confidence that they can undertake the behaviour in question and see it through to completion. It usually relates to a specific object or situation (e.g. joining a cooking class and being able to cook at home), but people are sometimes also described as having 'low agency' (generally lacking in confidence).

Habit: Habits are those behaviours which are undertaken automatically and frequently, with little conscious thought, and usually in the same time or place. These can also be understood as routines (e.g. the way practitioners usually work with clients, or the current way of operating a programme or procedure).

Knowledge & Skills: Skills are the things a person needs to know in order to carry out a behaviour. These include both procedural knowledge ('know how') (e.g. how to budget on a low income) and factual knowledge ('know what') (e.g. how to get the benefits they are entitled to).

SOCIAL FACTORS THAT SHAPE BEHAVIOUR

Opinion Leaders: Opinion leaders can be thought of as individuals who have a strong influence over others, for instance in shaping social norms. In social networks, these people could be network nodes, who connect numerous others. In everyday life, examples could include faith leaders or celebrities.

Institutions: Institutions influence how groups of individuals behave when they are engaging in particular activities or interacting with other people. Institutions can be formal (such as the legal system) or more informal (such as family life). In either, shared expectations about how members should behave are transmitted (e.g. eating together as desirable). Shared understandings may also take shape as explicit rules and regulations.

Norms: People's perception of how other people (especially 'significant' others) would view their behaviour. In turn these perceptions have a strong influence on the behavioural decisions that people make (e.g. people being aware that they are not supposed eat unhealthy foods, but they see other people doing it).

Roles & Identity: Roles relate to a person's different repertoires of behaviours and attitudes, based on the role they are fulfilling at the time (e.g. mother, employee, football supporter etc.). The related concept of identity is a person's innate sense of who they are (e.g. being a good person or identifying with a political persuasion or movement).

Tastes: Tastes can be understood as preferences through which people signal their belonging to particular social groups (e.g. kinds of music listened to, or table manners). These preferences are collectively developed and are based on shared understandings of appropriate and desirable conduct.

Meanings: Meanings are culturally constructed understandings of daily life which can include images, ideas, metaphors, and associations. These meanings effectively set the frame for a behaviour or practice, and in so doing influence how it is undertaken, and how it is understood (e.g. smoking in popular culture used to mean sophistication and glamour, but now is more likely to mean an unhealthy lifestyle).

Networks & Relationships: Connections between individuals, which people identify and draw upon in identifying and carrying out possible courses of action (this is sometimes called 'social capital'). In aggregate, social networks can help to explain how ideas, innovations and behaviours can spread (e.g. people using social media to communicate about professional ideas).

MATERIAL FACTORS THAT SHAPE BEHAVIOUR

Rules & Regulations: At their most basic, rules and regulations are set out by formal institutions, such as government, to prescribe or prohibit certain kinds of behaviour (e.g. through the taxation system). Yet rules and regulations are also implicit, for instance determining appropriate conduct for individuals in informal institutions (e.g. dress codes in different workplaces).

Technologies: Technology is sometimes contrasted to behaviour, in that technologies are presented as ruling out the need for individuals to change their behaviour. However, individuals and technologies interact, and this can influence the effectiveness of a technology in terms of its desired impact (e.g. people switching off smoke alarms because they go off when they are cooking). This interaction also enables new practices, and the meanings of these practices, to spring up and take hold quickly (e.g. tweeting).

Time & Schedules: Time is a finite resource that gets used in the course of carrying out everyday activities. Like money, it is a scarce resource that people have to allocate across competing demands. Changes in schedules (e.g. set by formal institutions) can often result in changes in individuals' practices, for instance, school hours and commuting habits.

Infrastructure: Hard infrastructure relates to the firm boundaries to people's behavioural choices presented by the environments in which they live (for example, without community meeting facilities there will be no chance of community meetings). Such factors can often prevent even motivated people from undertaking the behaviour in question. Alongside hard infrastructure, soft infrastructure emphasises features of everyday life which also bound individual action, but are not concrete (see Time & Schedules, and Rules & Regulations).

Objects: Many behaviours (e.g. communication) involve the use of objects (e.g. a mobile phone, email etc), and the lack of necessary objects can stop a practice from being undertaken. As with technologies, objects and individual users interact, such that sometimes the object can 'act back' on its owner and heavily influence how much time an individual spends on which practices (e.g. spending lots of time sorting and replying to email).

An example

We used the ISM approach to understand the context for Violence Against Children in Peru, for a project investigating the impact of a research programme with UNICEF and the University of Edinburgh².

Contextual analysis summary of factors influencing violence against children in Peru

INDIVIDUAL	SOCIAL	MATERIAL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are ashamed • Violence is everywhere • It's just a part of growing up • We don't believe this is happening • Such a big problem - how can we change it? • We can share evidence of the problem and potential solutions • We need to know how many are affected • We need to know more about solutions • How much will it cost? • It's too scary to tackle • We want to change this • We want to learn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Underlying beliefs and practices • Personal histories of violence • Cross ministry challenges • Strong ideas about child-rearing • Socio-ecological approach dominant • Corporal punishment seen as effective means of discipline • Mutual reinforcement amongst those seeking change • Ministry reluctance to do research • Research isn't helpful • Violence normalised • Patriarchal norms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abandoned children • Change of government • Lack of support for parents and professionals • Websites communicate change in law • Strategies for managing children's behaviour (non-violently) • Under-developed child protection system • Challenges of geographical splits in Peru • Social media and video for communication • Child helpline

² <https://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/22063>