HARNESSING THE POWER OF HUMAN SOCIALITY FOR THE EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF ANTI-POVERTY SCHEMES IN INDIA

Ms. Kruti Brahmhatt

Abstract

As social beings, individuals exert influence on each other. This influence can be utilized in the sphere of social policy. This paper aims to explore different ways human sociality can be leveraged to improve the implementation of government anti-poverty schemes in India. The paper discusses the role of social recognition, social incentives, and social norms for the delivery of anti-poverty schemes in India. It also explores ways in which social norms can amplify social change and bring shift in behaviour which in turn holds power to increase the effectiveness of government anti-poverty schemes.

Keywords: Anti-poverty schemes, poverty alleviation, social norms, social incentives, social change

Introduction

Humans as social beings, influence each other. It is surprising that policy makers have paid little attention on utilizing human sociality to make the implementation of anti-poverty schemes more effective for the target audience. People are as much shaped by social perspectives as by individual perspectives. People tend to know and understand how others think and behave and let that affect their behaviour as if their brains are connected with each other (Tomasello). Our tendency to associate with others and behave like them affect our behaviour and can have significant connotation for policy sphere. This aspect of sociality has a pivotal role to play in social policy domain and in particular for the implementation of the anti-poverty schemes in India. The paper will focus on different ways in which social context can be utilized to make anti-poverty schemes more effective on the ground.

The power of social incentives

We know the power of economic incentives on individual efforts. But even social incentives such as prestige, praise in public can nudge people towards prosocial

behaviour. The government anti-poverty schemes can utilize this human desire for recognition and status. It is complex to figure out when to use social awards but as a general rule they can be used when it is difficult to measure individual's output (Besley and Ghatak) and when financial resources are not abundant. This is one of the reasons why educational institutes and political parties often use social recognition (Hechter).

For implementing many government schemes such as midday meal schemes, the government can come up with bestowing ranks on the exemplary states. The states compete with each other and this may improve their performance. Many international organizations such as the World Bank use rankings such as Doing Business Rankings not only to give information regarding performance but in a way also to nudge nations towards an ideology of what a good society that is conducive for businesses looks like (Davis and others). The government can use such rankings for different anti-poverty schemes and let the states compete with each other. This will not only incentivize the better performing states to vie with each other but it will also let the poor performing states know the ideal that is expected of them and even nudge them to shift the state action.

The power of social networks on individual decision making

With regards to deciding whether to pursue a particular course of action, we often tend to look into our social network and see if they are undertaking that particular course of action. The same is true for the poor. They tend to gain information from their social network. They decide whether to participate in a particular government scheme or not based on the viewpoint held by the people in her close-knit circle. If the social network is of the opinion that a particular government scheme in question is not going to be of much benefit, it's more likely that an individual would not be willing to participate. It is crucial that government anti-poverty schemes are designed in ways which can be agreeable to the masses. It is one thing to have an idealized vision of the society and another for a society to adopt that change wholeheartedly. If policy makers pay more attention to understanding the power of social context, it would boost the participation of the poor and in turn reduce the poverty rate which will have more lasting impact on the economy. It is pertinent to understand the scope of social networks because social networks provide scope for individuals to reinforce existing behaviour among each other (World Bank). Our preferences, beliefs, resources and choices are heavily influenced by the social networks we are related to (Simmel; Granovetter). These networks form a foundation of our social experience. Social networks need to be understood precisely for that reason and utilized for the implementation of government anti-poverty schemes.

The power of social norms on individual decision making

In the context of anti-poverty schemes, some behaviours are important for development such as using toilets. Sometimes, people are unaware of the extent of

toilet usage and consider it a norm to not use the toilet which may be incorrect. In this case, using a toilet can be marketed as a norm which can nudge non-users to use the toilets. When non-users come to know about the number of people or percentage of people in the community use toilets, they are likely to consider using toilets as a norm and in turn change their behaviour. Brief communication interventions by the government can play a pivotal role in correcting misconceptions prevalent in society. Social norms or shared beliefs govern the way individuals behave or are likely to make decisions about important aspects in life. Mirroring others is one of the key strategies of interacting in the world (Henrich and Henrich). Power of social norms is immense in the social policy domain. The government can design policies that are consistent with the existing norms in the society. In this case, the signing up for a particular anti-poverty scheme can be easier for people if it is designed with keeping in mind the norms prevalent in society. Many a times, when it is not the case, the beneficiaries are less likely to sign up for availing the benefits of the programme.

The norms are not fixed in nature and do change from time to time. However, these shifts do not happen suddenly and take time. Government can often bring change in norms through law (Sunstein). Government can change the incentives and social meaning of actions through law enforcements. But even laws sometimes fail to bring desired change if these laws are not consistent with the social norms (World Bank). For all these practical reasons, when designing and implementing any government anti-poverty scheme, it is important to understand the prevalent norms in the society. Whether a policy can harness the power of existing norm or will have to go against the existing norm plays an important role in adoption of particular government scheme.

Targeting specific individuals to lead and bring social change

In order to target a specific group for any public policy initiative or anti-poverty scheme, it is helpful to target specific individuals within that community who can act as leaders. This leader should be someone people look upto for inspiration and encouragement. These individuals play a significant role in shaping behaviour of the community members. For example, a randomized controlled trial in China showed that farmers in rural China were more likely to avail weather insurance when their friend had participated in an information session which gave details on the benefits of the program (World Bank). The network effect played an important role in nudging individuals. Similarly, in Malawi, an experiment showed that when a small incentive was offered to few individuals to communicate the benefit of a new seed technology, it proved to be a cost-effective method to drive adoption of this new technology among the peer group (Benyishay and Mobarak). From these studies, one can see the extent of influence these social networks exert on individuals. When implementing a new anti-poverty scheme, it is important to pick some leaders from the target group and explain them the details and benefits of the program first and then give them a small incentive to reach out to the other members of the community. Even in the case of absence of incentive, if the leaders know the government scheme is beneficial, they hold the

power to nudge people to sign up for a particular scheme when the community members come to take advice from them. Whether it is India's Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) or The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), or social security pensions such as the Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme, targeting specific individuals to lead the campaign can yield positive results in terms of increasing the reach of these schemes to the poorest of the poor in the country.

Conclusion

Government policies pay much more focus on individual behaviour and disregard the element of human sociality which also drives human behaviour. If the policy makers design and implement social schemes keeping the insights of human sociality in mind, it would certainly help making the government anti-poverty schemes reach to the segment which needs it the most. After all, the poor need resources, they need government help in most cases and getting them enrolled in government schemes should not be difficult. However, sometimes, the design of these anti-poverty schemes or attitude of frontline workers is such that can turn the future beneficiaries away. It is important to keep the individual factors as well as societal factors in mind when designing and implementing such schemes on the ground. It is also favourable to use incentives where required. However, it is also important to note that financial incentives are not the only way and they do not always work and on such occasions social incentives should be given to the frontline workers or community leaders who help the government get to the beneficiaries for specific programmes. The drive for social status and recognition can be used along with other measures while implementing government schemes on the ground.

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Kruti Brahmbhatt
Ph.D Research Scholar,
Department of Economics,
School of Social Sciences,
Gujarat University, Ahmedabad
Email – krutibrahmbhatt@gmail.com