Social Norms: The Invisible Inputs and Outputs of Development Policy

AUTHORS:

Aditi Bhowmick, Harvard Kennedy School
Eliana La Ferrara, Harvard Kennedy School

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Harvard Center for International Development
Harvard University
79 JFK Street
Cambridge, MA 02138
cid.harvard.edu

ELIANA LA FERRARA

HARVARD KENNEDY SCHOOL

Professor of Public Policy

Eliana La Ferrara is Professor of Public Policy at Harvard Kennedy School and Program Director of Development Economics at the Center for Economic Policy Research (CEPR). Her work focuses on development and political economics, with an emphasis on the role of social factors in economic development. She combines fieldwork, empirical analysis, and theory to study issues such as social norms, inequality, and conflict, often in collaboration with governments and international organizations. She has published in leading journals including the American Economic Review, Econometrica, and the Quarterly Journal of Economics, and has held leadership roles including President of the Econometric Society. She is the recipient of the Birgit Grodal Award and holds a PhD in Economics from Harvard University.

ADITI BHOWMICK

HARVARD KENNEDY SCHOOL

PhD Candidate in Public Policy

Aditi Bhowmick is a PhD candidate in Public Policy (Economics track) at Harvard Kennedy School, a CID PhD affiliate, and a PhD Scholar in the Stone Program in Inequality and Social Policy. Her research lies at the intersection of development and labor economics, with a focus on female labor force participation, social norms, and gender inequality in South Asia and other developing countries. She examines how social norms interact with economic shocks to shape labor market outcomes and perpetuate inequality. Prior to her doctoral studies, she served as India Director at Development Data Lab, where her work explored judicial bias, social mobility in South Asia, excess mortality during COVID-19, and the role of cultural distance in economic opportunity.

Development policy does not operate in a social vacuum. Programs are implemented within communities that are structured by norms governing cooperation, authority, gender roles, kinship, inheritance, and social hierarchy, to name a few. These norms shape which policies "fit" a given context and determine how promising interventions play out in practice: Do they work? Do their effects persist? Or do such policies backfire and generate unintended consequences?

Academic research has come a long way in understanding the many ways in which social norms influence and are influenced by development programs. This essay outlines a vision to bring social norms at the heart of the practice of development policy, which remains largely norm-blind. We start by making the case for why it is imperative to move toward a norm-aware standard in terms of how development policy is designed and implemented by practitioners, and then go on to provide a blueprint for how to get there.

At a minimum, norm-aware development policy should ensure that existing social norms and preferences are not in direct conflict with policy objectives. Failure to account for local norms can lead to muted impacts, unintended consequences, or even backlash. For example, consider India's nationwide toilet construction drive. Since 1986, the government has spent $3 billion USD building toilets across the country, substantially increasing access. However, usage is limited due to interference with untouchability and caste pollution norms. Infrastructure alone proved insufficient: without addressing the underlying norms, millions remained exposed to preventable disease.

In other contexts, policies have not merely underperformed but actively backfired. Evidence from Afghanistan shows that financial incentives to encourage reporting of public-sector corruption reduced reporting rates by crowding out moral motivations. Other well-meaning programs, such as increasing women's economic empowerment through paid employment and school expansion, may backfire and increase violence against women by triggering male backlash, unless the husband has a financial interest.

In an ideal scenario, however, policy can do more than avoid harm. It can actively leverage social norms to improve take-up and increase the likelihood of sustained change. Many development interventions depend not only on short-term compliance but on durable shifts in behavior. Whether impacts persist often hinges on individuals internalizing that societal expectations have shifted. This is where norms

interventions can actively complement development policy.

There is growing evidence that norm-sensitive design can ***amplify impact***. In Saudi Arabia, recent work has demonstrated how correcting men's misperceptions about other men's support for women's labor force participation can lead to substantial and persistent increases in women's job applications. In rural India, studies have shown that, while financial subsidies increased clinic visits for reproductive health services, meaningful changes in contraceptive use and pregnancy outcomes occurred only when subsidies were paired with a "bring-a-friend" option that leveraged peer support. These effects were strongest among women facing greater intra-household opposition at baseline.

In other cases, norm change may be required as a precondition for policy action. For example, efforts to improve human capital accumulation for girls in society where female genital cutting (FGC) is ubiquitous may require shifting societies away from the status quo norm. This can be done by re-aligning beliefs in setting with pluralistic ignorance or "replacing" the existing norm with an alternative generated through a bottom-up process.

Social norms, therefore, can operate as both constraints and levers in development policy. They shape who benefits from programs, whether impacts persist, and how communities respond to institutional change. Ignoring them risks evaluating policies in isolation from the social systems that ultimately determine their success.
The vision we propose is straightforward: development policy should be norm-aware by design. At a minimum, this means systematically assessing whether proposed interventions align with prevailing beliefs and authority structures. Where applicable, it also means integrating norms into the theory of change, either by leveraging existing norms to reinforce positive behavior or by deliberately targeting harmful norms as part of policy objectives.

If development policy is to move beyond short-term gains toward sustained social transformation, it must recognize that changing resources is not the same as changing rules of behavior. Social norms are not peripheral to development, they are part of the mechanism through which development policy succeeds or fails.

Social Norms as Development Policy Inputs: Measurement

What goes unmeasured is poorly understood — and rarely changed. In the 1990s, the World Bank published a breakthrough World Development Report introducing the "dollar-a-day" concept as a globally comparable poverty metric. In the years leading up to it, the flagship Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS) surveys were launched across continents, creating a standardized empirical foundation for poverty analysis. Since then, LSMS data have served as a backbone for development researchers and practitioners worldwide.

The Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) have played a similar role in health policy, providing consistent, nationally representative data on fertility, maternal and child health, nutrition, HIV, malaria, and other metrics. In many countries, DHS data remain the only reliable and comparable source of key health indicators. When USAID funding ended in 2025, bringing future DHS data collection to a halt, observers remarked that "the world lost its health report card."

Across sectors, development policy rests on comparable data infrastructures: the Penn World Tables for macroeconomic analysis; FAO-GAEZ for agro-ecological policy; CHIRPS-CHIRTS for climate-development research and policy; and the World Development Indicators for policy across sectors.

Where is the parallel data backbone for social norms? Here the measurement architecture is far thinner. Existing efforts remain partial and fragmented across countries. Surveys such as the World Values Survey capture broad attitudes and beliefs, but limited geographic coverage, representation, and scope constrain its utility for design and evaluation of development policy. Historical datasets, ranging from Murdock's Ethnographic Atlas to colonial ethnographic records in South Asia, provide important context, but reflect social realities that are often centuries removed from present conditions. These tools are invaluable for understanding long-run origins of norms but have limited practical relevance for contemporary policy design and evaluation.

To address this data vacuum, we propose the creation of a ***Social Norms Atlas*** for developing countries, a standardized platform analogous to the World Development Indicators. Such a platform would allow researchers and policymakers to track contemporary prevalence and evolution of policy-relevant social norms — measured

consistently — across countries, regions, and time.

Ideally, the Social Norms Atlas would be developed by a multidisciplinary team of social scientists working alongside country teams within a multilateral institution with a proven track record of producing digital public goods. Like the LSMS or DHS before it, the goal would be to create a comparable, policy-relevant measurement architecture that makes social norms visible, trackable, and actionable. A key input for the creation of such an atlas would be the mapping of contemporary policy tools and goals to norms that may interfere, or facilitate with, the attainment of such goals.

The table below outlines a preliminary and incomplete exercise in this direction, listing a set of policy-relevant social norms that could anchor the broader effort. As such, this list is intended as a starting point rather than an exhaustive inventory.

Marriage, Family Formation, and Kinship Systems		
NORM	**DESCRIPTION**	**POLICY RELEVANCE**
Child Marriage	Marriage below the legal age, including early childhood unions.	Informs education retention, maternal health, gender-based violence prevention, and enforcement of age-at-marriage laws.
Forced/Exchange Marriage	Marriage conducted without full consent, sometimes to settle disputes or debts.	Guides child protection systems, survivor services, and enforcement of marriage laws.
Polygamy	Social acceptance of multi-spouse unions, typically one man with multiple wives.	Shapes household resource allocation, inheritance dynamics, and gender equity.

Marriage, Family Formation, and Kinship Systems (cont.)

NORM	DESCRIPTION	POLICY RELEVANCE
Divorce and Separation	Social rules governing the acceptability and consequences of marital dissolution.	Influences family law reform, social protection eligibility, and women's economic security.
Marriage Payments	Transfers of money or assets between families at marriage (e.g., dowry, bride price, mehr).	Affects household debt, women's bargaining power, and dowry-related violence prevention.
Marriage and Funeral Expenditures	Social expectations regarding ceremonial spending.	Influences savings behavior, indebtedness, and poverty-targeted policy design.
Endogamy	Norms requiring marriage within a caste, clan, religion, or social group.	Affects social mobility, segregation, and inter-group inequality.
Patrilocality / Matrilocality	Expectation that married couples reside with or near the husband's/wife's family.	Shapes women's mobility, caregiving burdens, and access to assets.

Inheritance, Property, and Economic Organization

NORM	DESCRIPTION	POLICY RELEVANCE
Patrilineality/ Matrilineality	Lineage and inheritance traced through the male/female line.	Drives gender gaps in asset ownership and intergenerational wealth transmission.
Inheritance	Rules governing distribution of property after death.	Central to gender-equitable asset reform, and investment and wealth redistribution policy.
Asset Ownership and Control	Norms defining ownership and use of land and property (individual, communal, lineage-based).	Informs land reform, investment policy, climate resilience, and conflict prevention.
Traditional Occupations	Social norms linking specific groups to hereditary occupations.	Affects labor mobility, skills upgrading, and anti-discrimination policy.
Bonded Labor	Debt-linked labor under coercive or exploitative conditions.	Affects anti-trafficking enforcement and labor regulation.
Risk-Sharing	Informal systems of mutual aid and resource pooling within relevant community (e.g. age-sets, kin groups, villages).	Informs the design of insurance and social protection systems.

Intra-Household Dynamics

NORM	DESCRIPTION	POLICY RELEVANCE
Intra-Household Bargaining	Norms shaping decision-making authority within families.	Critical for designing cash transfers and welfare programs.
Male Breadwinner	Expectation that men should be the primary income earners while women may provide unpaid care.	Influences labor force participation, childcare policy, and tax design.
Son Preference	Norm favoring male children over female children.	Affects fertility behavior, sex ratios, and child welfare outcomes.
Menstrual Taboos	Restrictions or exclusionary practices during menstruation.	Informs reproductive health access, school attendance, workplace inclusion, and gender equity programming.

Governance, Land Use, and Mobility

NORM	DESCRIPTION	POLICY RELEVANCE
Role of Traditional Councils/Chiefs	Authority of customary leaders in dispute resolution and governance.	Affects compliance with, and legal enforcement of, formal laws.
Fallowing	Customary rules governing temporary land rest for regeneration.	Supports sustainable agriculture and land management policy.

Governance, Land Use, and Mobility (cont.)

NORM	DESCRIPTION	POLICY RELEVANCE
Shifting Cultivation Practices	Rotational cultivation systems involving temporary settlement and relocation.	Balances environmental conservation with livelihood protection.
Migration	Cultural expectations governing seasonal or long-term mobility (e.g. nomadic communities, pastoralists).	Shapes service delivery models, education access, infrastructure planning, and documentation policy for mobile populations. May affect inter-group conflict.

High-Risk and Harmful Norms

NORM	DESCRIPTION	POLICY RELEVANCE
Female genital cutting	Cultural support for non-medical genital cutting.	Impacts women's health and affects enforcement of legal bans.
Honor-Based Violence	Violence justified by perceived violations of family or community honor.	Relevant for violence-prevention strategies.
Ritual Scarification (Non-Consensual)	Culturally mandated body marking involving coercion or minors.	Informs health policy and child protection interventions.

A first step to build such a platform would entail developing a ***standardized social norms and beliefs survey module***, that would then be integrated with representative household surveys that are already implemented across many developing countries, either through institutions such as the World Bank, think-tanks, and consortiums (e.g. ICSPR, CMIE), or country governments. Some useful benchmarks include: the Global Preferences Survey, which is a standardized survey spanning 80,000 individuals across 76 countries with (experimentally validated) measures of time preference, risk preference, positive and negative reciprocity, altruism, and trust; the global gender norms misperceptions dataset compiled by a team of researchers using nationally representative survey data spanning 60 countries; and the Samaj Survey panel implemented by the Center for Monitoring the Indian Economy between 2014-2019.

Social Norms as Development Policy Outputs: Monitoring and Evaluation

Institutions such as the J-PAL network, Innovations for Poverty Action, Evidence Action, and International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) have transformed development practice over the past three decades by advancing evidence-based policy. Monitoring systems and impact evaluation teams are now routinely embedded within large-scale government and multilateral programs. However, the monitoring indicators and outcome variables that are collected rarely, if ever, track how development programs shift beliefs, preferences, and ultimately culture.

We argue that social norms belong not only on the right-hand side of the causal chain, as background constraints shaping policy effectiveness, but also on the left-hand side, as endogenous outcomes that respond to development interventions, even when those interventions do not explicitly target norms.

With the exception of dispersed academic studies, most evaluations focus on the outcomes directly targeted by the intervention, while leaving the broader social equilibrium unobserved. This omission matters. Development programs do not operate in isolation; they intervene in complex social systems. Policies that alter incentives, redistribute resources, or change institutional arrangements can reshape expectations about what others believe and do.

Consider recent evidence across diverse policy domains. Combining network theory with the evaluation of microfinance expansion has found that exposure to formal credit significantly altered village risk-sharing networks, in some cases pushing

credit-constrained households to the periphery of existing social ties. In rural India, one study has shown that exposure to female leaders elected through village-level gender quotas changed voter perceptions of women's competence, while also revealing the potential for backlash, while other research has documented that depositing public-sector wages into women-owned bank accounts had long-run effects on norms surrounding female labor force participation and perceptions of community expectations. In each case, the policy intervention reshaped the local norms landscape, even when normative change was not the primary objective.

The cumulative lesson from research at the intersection of development economics and social norms is clear: development policy often shifts beliefs and expectations in ways that may reinforce existing norms, destabilize them, or generate entirely new social equilibria. Yet, unless these changes are measured, they remain invisible in standard monitoring frameworks.

Ignoring these dynamics is akin to evaluating policy in partial equilibrium while overlooking general equilibrium responses. A program may achieve short-run gains yet leave intact the beliefs that sustain inequality. Alternatively, it may generate durable change precisely because it alters social expectations, even if the immediate material impacts appear modest. Without measuring norms, policymakers cannot distinguish between temporary behavioral compliance and genuine social transformation.

If development policy both responds to and reshapes social norms, these very norms should play a substantially larger role across policy design, measurement, and evaluation going forward.

Harvard Center for International Development
Harvard University
79 JFK Street
Cambridge, MA 02138
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