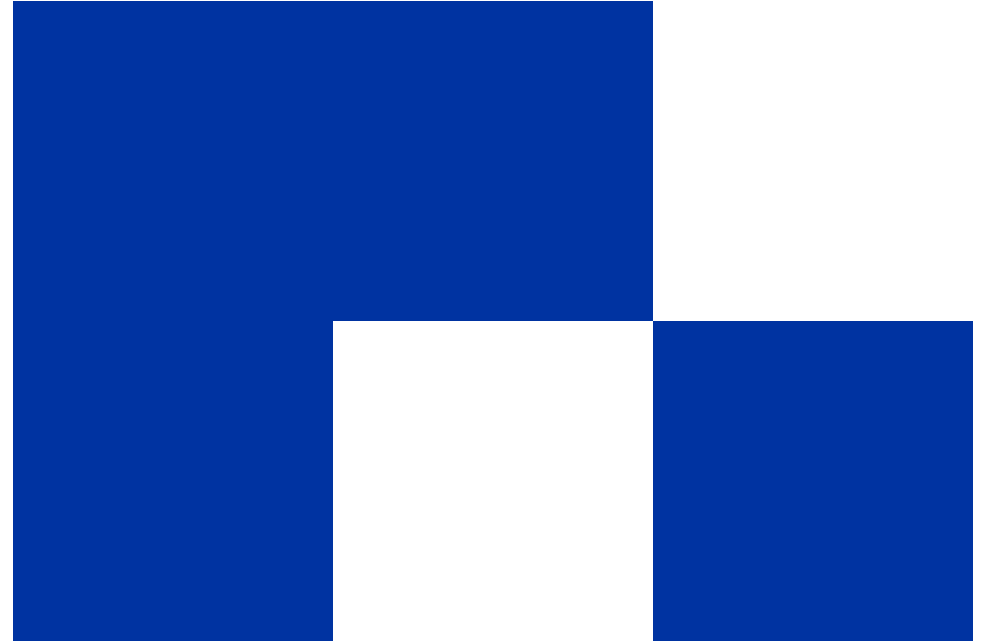


“Scailures”: Growing Pains in Applying Behavioral Science to New Contexts

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine
Workshop on Behavioral Economics: Exploring Applications and Research Methods
July 18 & 19, 2022



Anisha Singh and Channing Jang, PhD
Busara Center for Behavioral Economics

Busara works with researchers and organizations to advance and apply behavioral science in pursuit of poverty alleviation

Busara in numbers



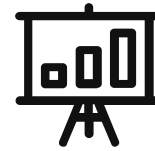
138

Full-time staff



4

Decision Labs



500+

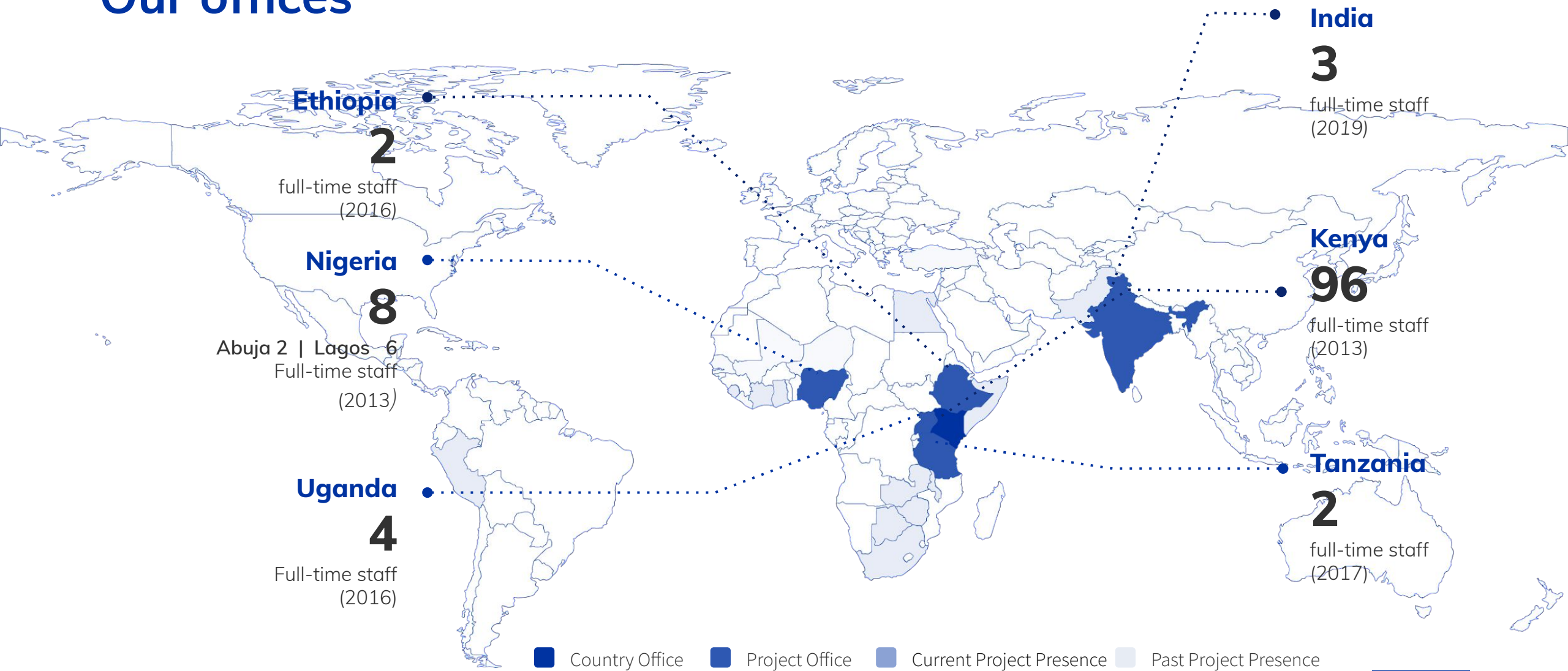
Completed Projects



9

Years in
Operation

Our offices



Behavioral Science has a WEIRD problem

- 1% of published psychology papers have African PIs or African samples
- Busara was established as an academic behavioral lab to do research in majority world populations
- In the past 9 years we've:
 - Built a subject pool of 133,000 participants
 - Built labs across the globe, both fixed and mobile
 - Collaborated with 100+ academics
 - Partnered on over 90 papers, with 3,000 citations
- We've also applied our work with more than 200 partners in more than 20 countries

Labs around the world



Businesses



Government / Multilateral



Non-Profits



Foundations



How can behavioral science be scaled to solve some of the worlds most wicked problems?

What have we learned throughout our own growing pains?

**Are we “generalizing to”
or “generalizing from”?**

The Linda Problem

Representativeness - the Original: Linda

Linda is 31 years old, single, outspoken and very bright. She majored in philosophy. As a student, she was deeply concerned with issues of discrimination and social justice, and also participated in anti-nuclear demonstrations.

Please rank the following possibilities by how likely they are to describe Linda, where 1 is the most likely to describe her, and 8 is the least likely to describe her:

1. Linda is a teacher in elementary school.
2. Linda works in a bookstore and takes Yoga classes.
3. Linda is active in the feminist movement.
4. Linda is a psychiatric social worker.
5. Linda is a member of the League of Women Voters.
- ⚡ 6. Linda is a bank teller.
7. Linda is an insurance salesperson.
- ⚡ 8. Linda is a bank teller and is active in the feminist movement.



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Linda is a bank teller

**Linda is a bank teller &
active in the feminist
movement**

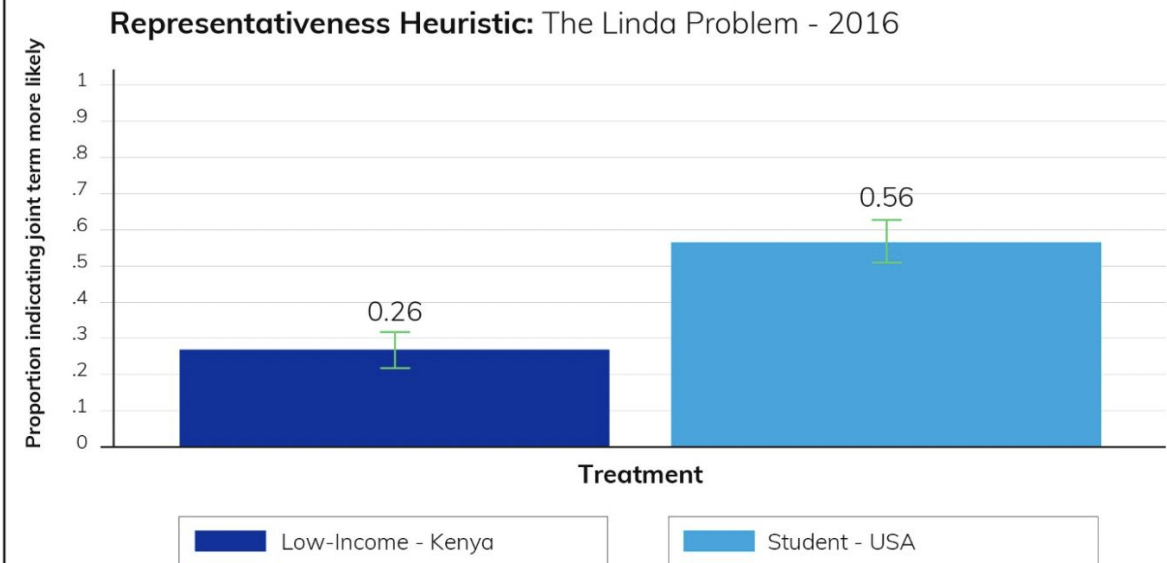
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The Problem with Preeti

Preeti is 30 years old; she is a mother and wife, did very well at school, independent, and always speaks her mind. At university she studied a degree in English; she met her husband in her second year of studies, fell in love, and was soon married. She cares deeply about her community and wants them to grow and succeed.

Please rank the following possibilities by how likely they are to describe Preeti, where 1 is the most likely to describe her, and 7 is the least likely to describe her.

1. Preeti is a teacher in nursery school.
2. Preeti is a salesperson.
3. Preeti is an active member of a leading political party.
4. Preeti is a community activist.
- ⚡ 5. Preeti is a beautician.
6. Preeti is a garment retailer.
- ⚡ 7. Preeti is a beautician and a community activist



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Preeti v2

Preeti is 30 years old; she did very well at school, is independent, and always speaks her mind. At university, she studied a degree in Politics, and was the president of the student union. She cares deeply about her community and wants them to grow and succeed.

Please rank the following possibilities by how likely they are to describe Preeti, where 1 is the most likely to describe her, and 5 is the least likely to describe her.

1. Preeti is a teacher in primary school.
2. Preeti volunteers for a local NGO.
- ⚡ 3. Preeti is a garment retailer.
4. Preeti works in a call center.
- ⚡ 5. Preeti is a garment retailer and volunteers for a local NGO.



Preeti v2

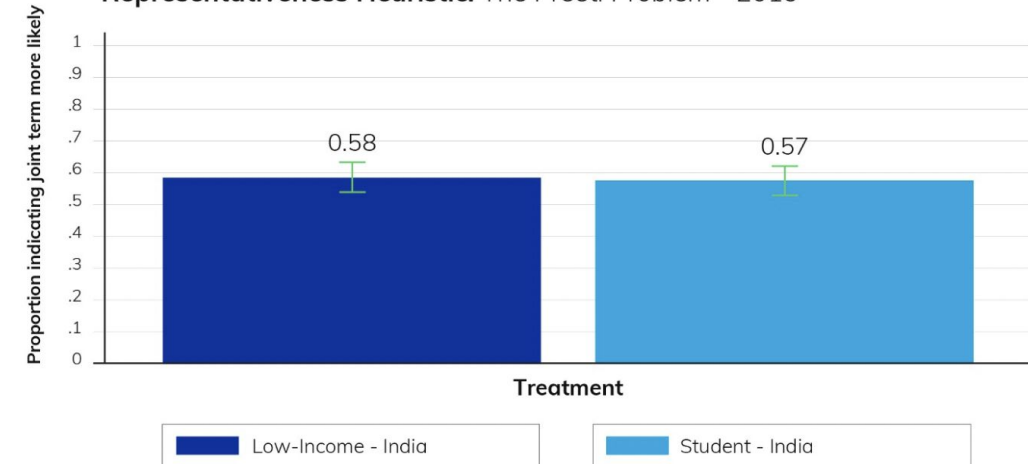
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Representativeness Heuristic: The Preeti Problem - 2019





What does “generalizing from” look like?

Take an existing
mechanism



Carefully design an
intervention to the
specific user context



Launch the intervention

Take an existing
mechanism



Carefully design an
intervention to the
specific user context



Launch the intervention

Find the best
mechanism for the
context

Agency interventions as a means of psychological and economic empowerment

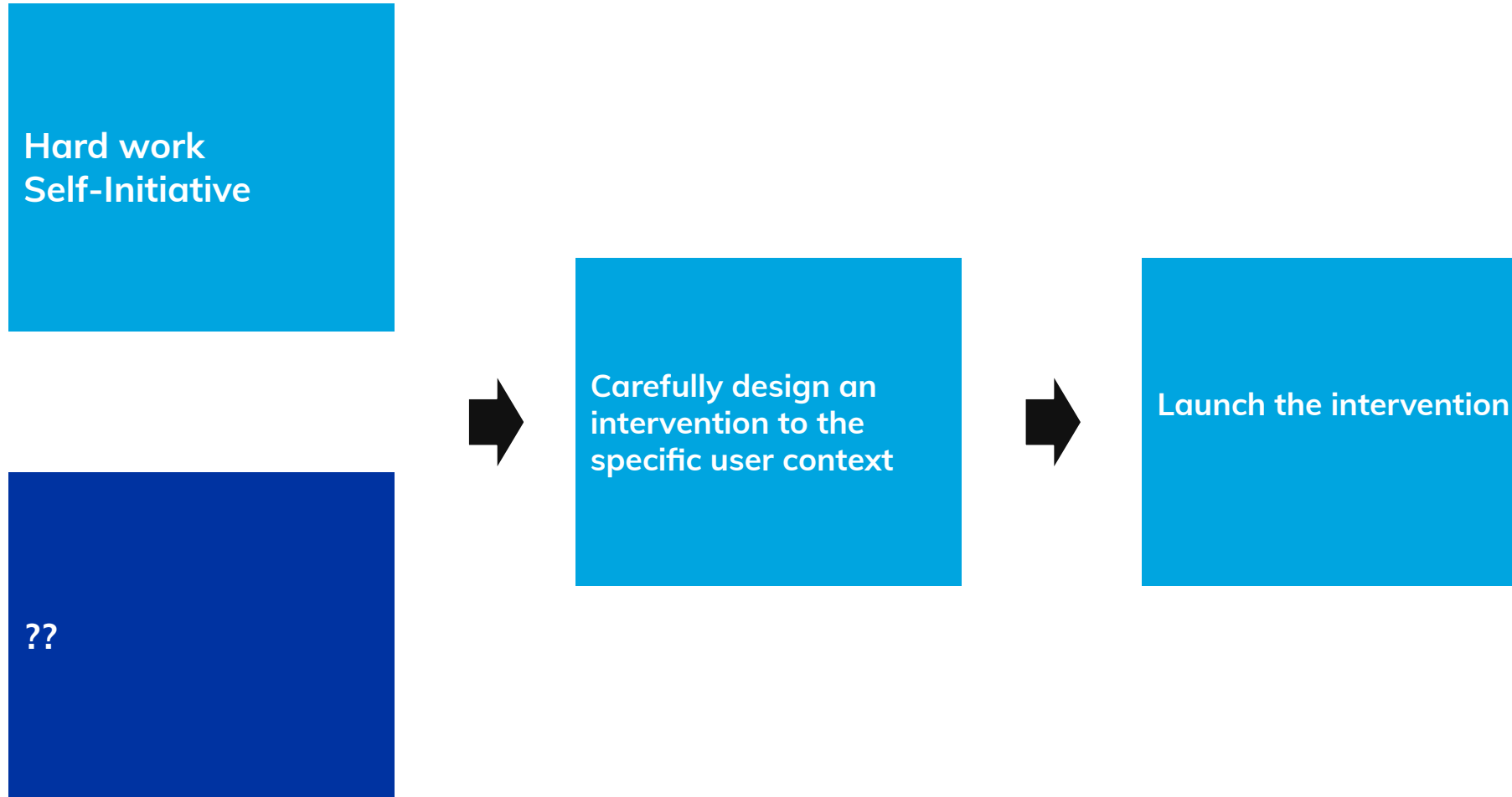
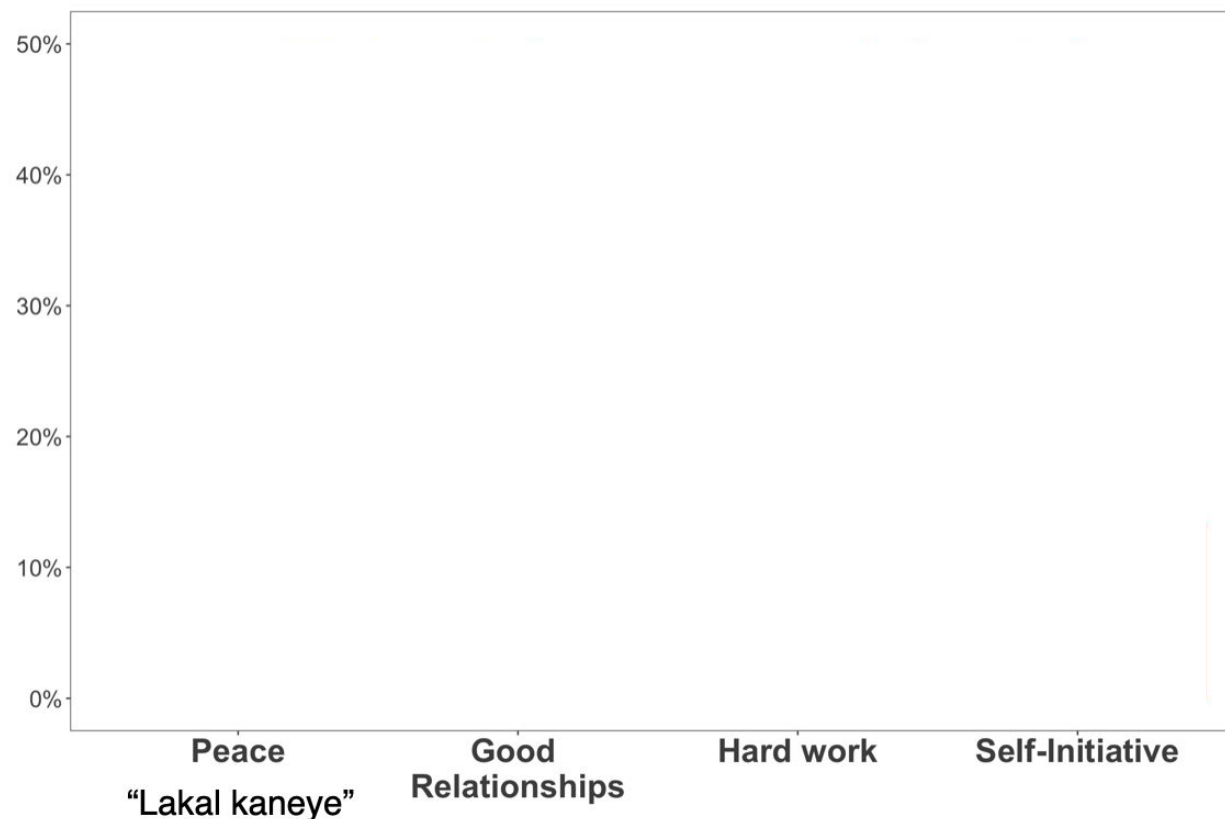




Photo from Catherine Thomas
consent obtained from participants

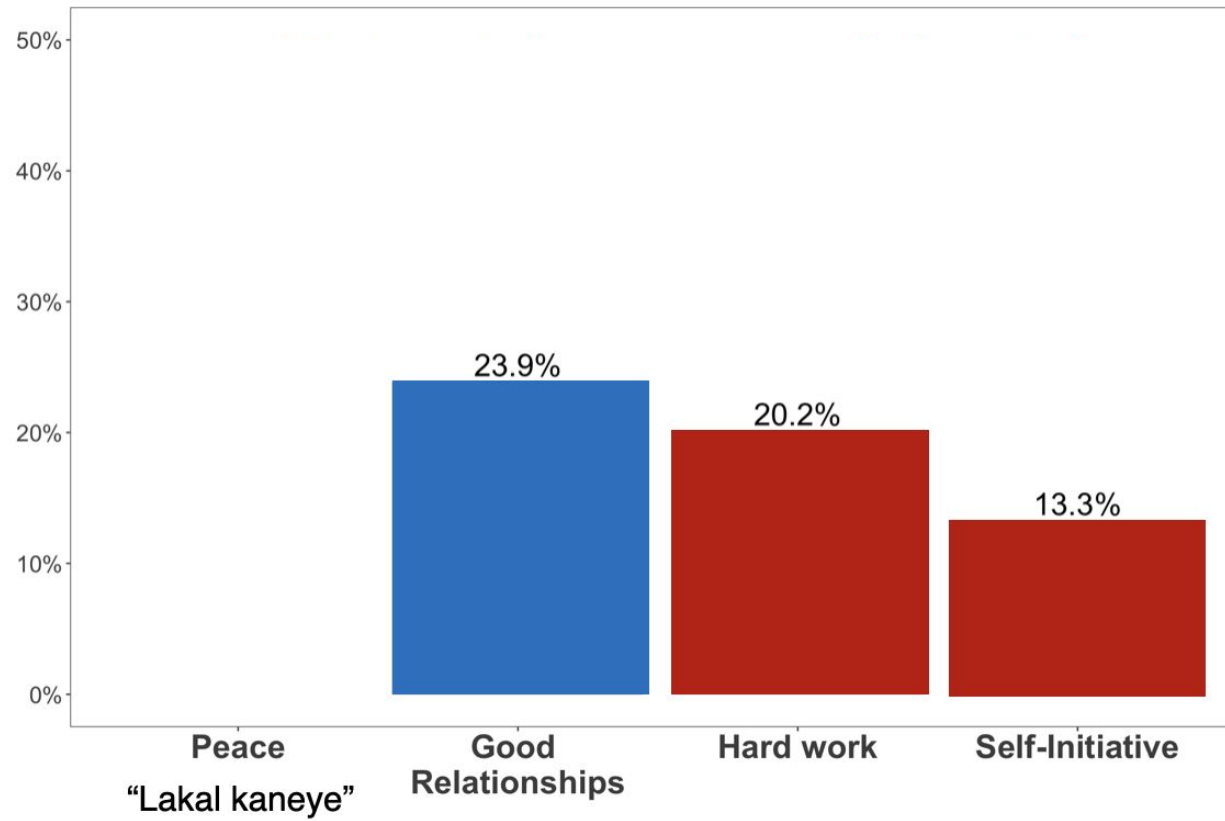
Agency interventions as a means of psychological and economic empowerment

Of these four qualities, which is the most important for women's economic success?



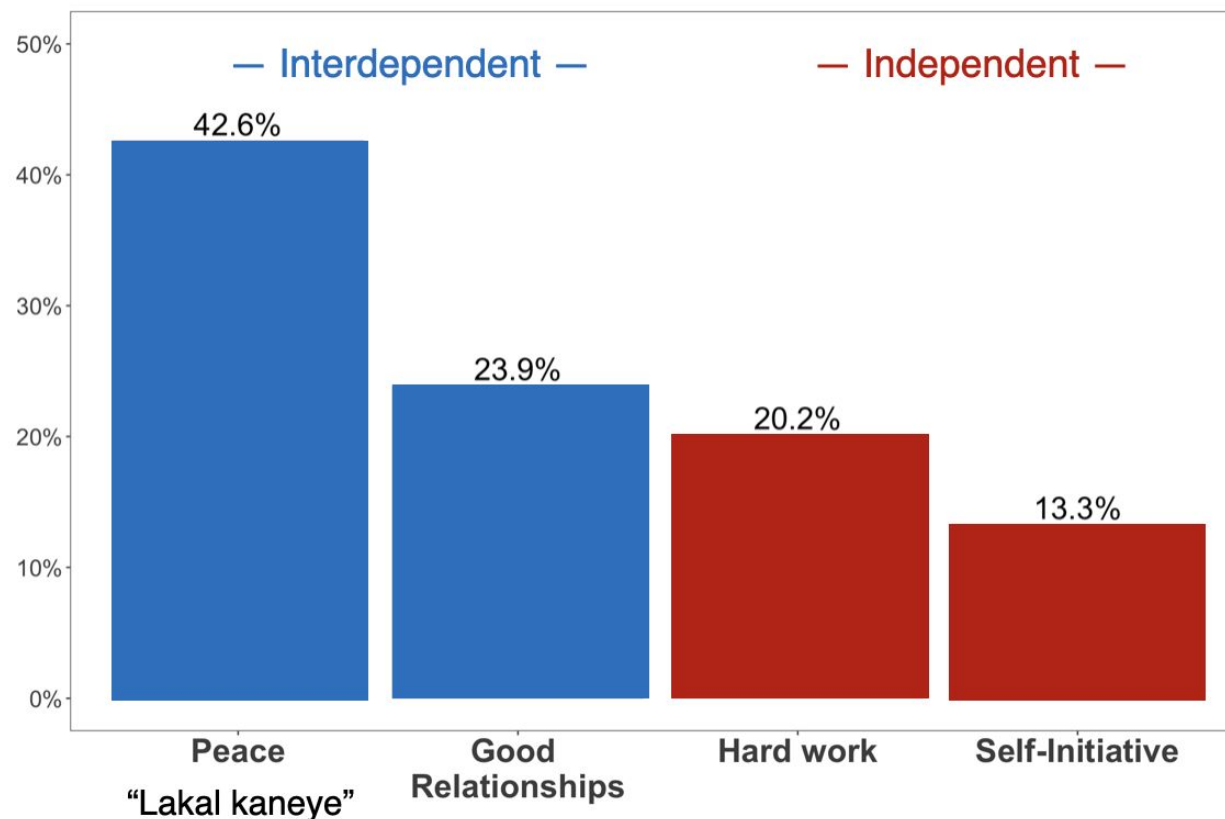
Agency interventions as a means of psychological and economic empowerment

Of these four qualities, which is the most important for women's economic success?



Agency interventions as a means of psychological and economic empowerment

Of these four qualities, which is the most important for women's economic success?



Generalize to vs generalize from

Takeaways:

- Adapting biases, heuristics and mechanisms takes care. Many are likely universal, subject to adaptation.
- Put users at the center of not just the intervention, but the understanding of the psychological mechanisms
- Work with researchers who take a less ethnocentric approach to research
 - e.g. Social psychologists, anthropologists, design thinkers, influencers

**We're not in Switzerland
anymore...**

Libertarian Paternalism...

How it started



Libertarian Paternalism...

How it started



How it's going



Offering resources in scarce settings often involves creating intentions



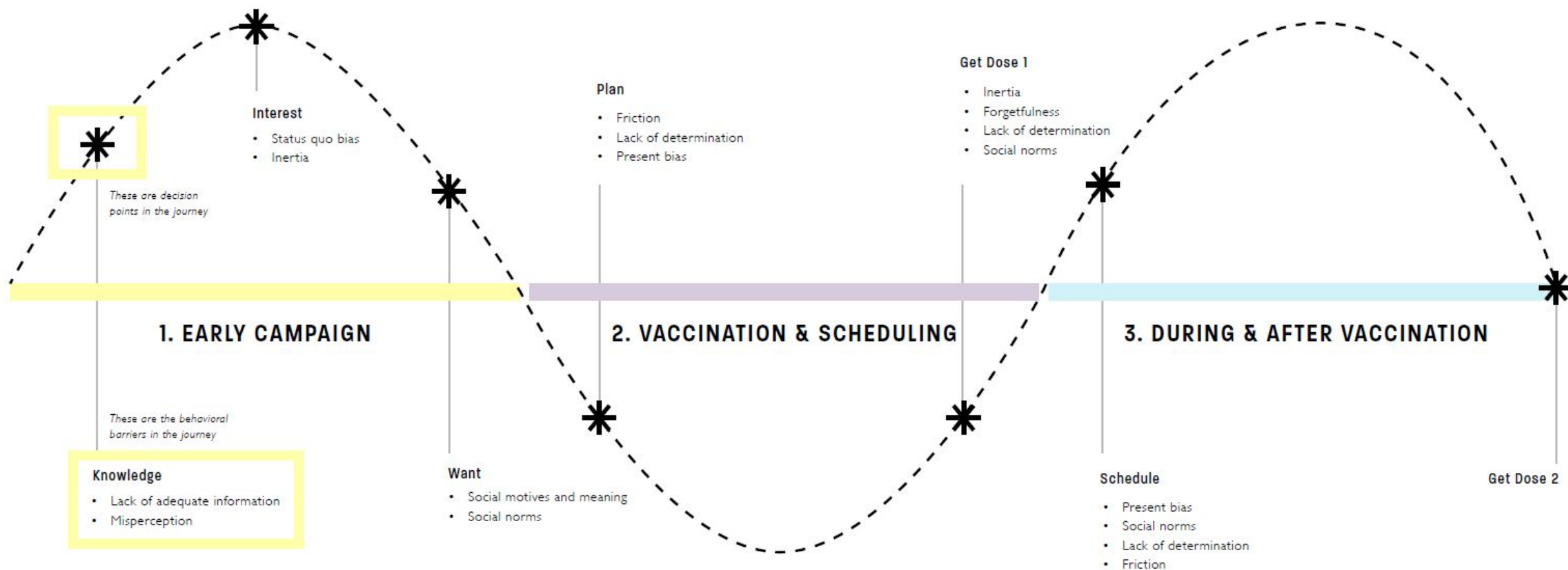
Chanua
Dada



PLAN
YOUR
FUTURE!

Chanua Dada partners with suppliers and pharmacies to give you information and access to family planning products at affordable prices.

Journey to vaccination

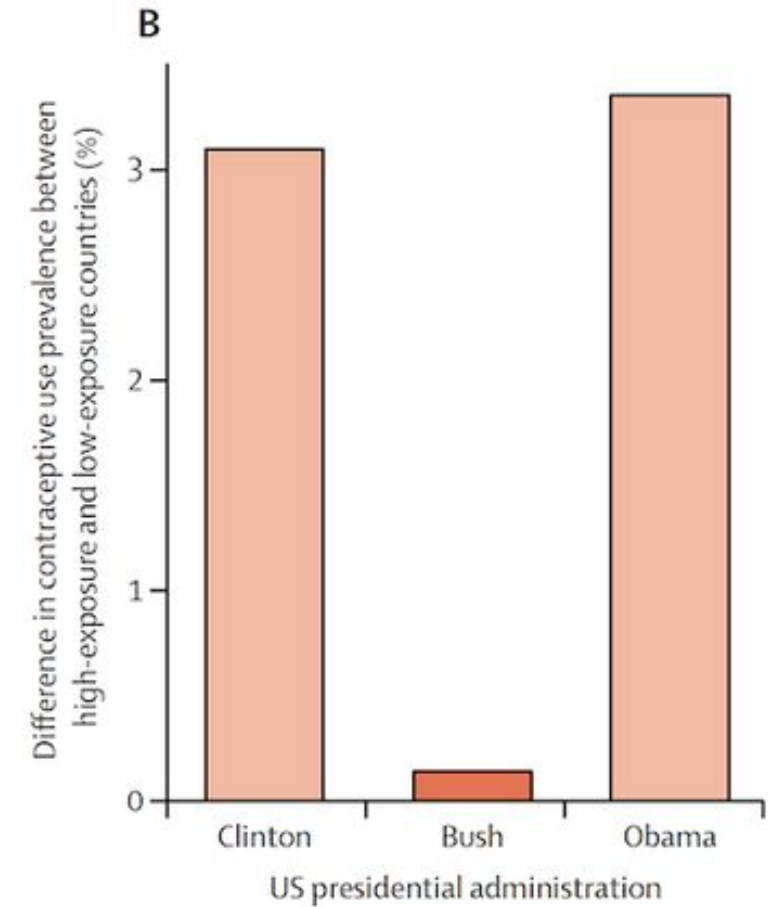
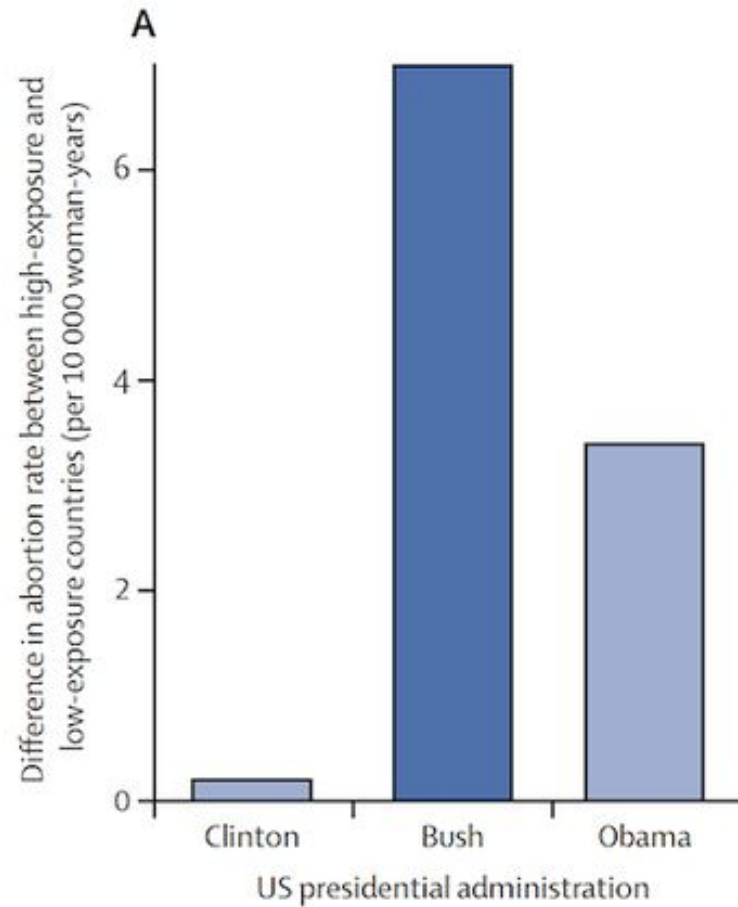


Doing what you believe is good isn't always shared by the community you serve

- **Parents:** “Does the HPV vaccine cause infertility? Are you secretly trying to enforce family planning?”
- **Doctors:** “HPV is not part of the current immunization program, let's just leave it out”
- **Women:** “Birth spacing is a foreign concept, we've always done it this way, we don't need injectables”
- **Pharmacists:** “These girls are too young to have sex, they shouldn't be able to have contraceptives”
- **Men:** “My partner should be faithful to me, we don't need to protect ourselves from STI's”

Nor by your funders / partners

Mexico City Policy



Libertarian Paternalism vs. Intention Creation

Takeaways:

- Prevailing perspective vs funder perspective vs our own perspective
- We're not immune - we have to think twice about who we work with and the type of projects
- Intentions that can create tension (internally too!) - behavioral science isn't neutral in development

Science is an anecdote

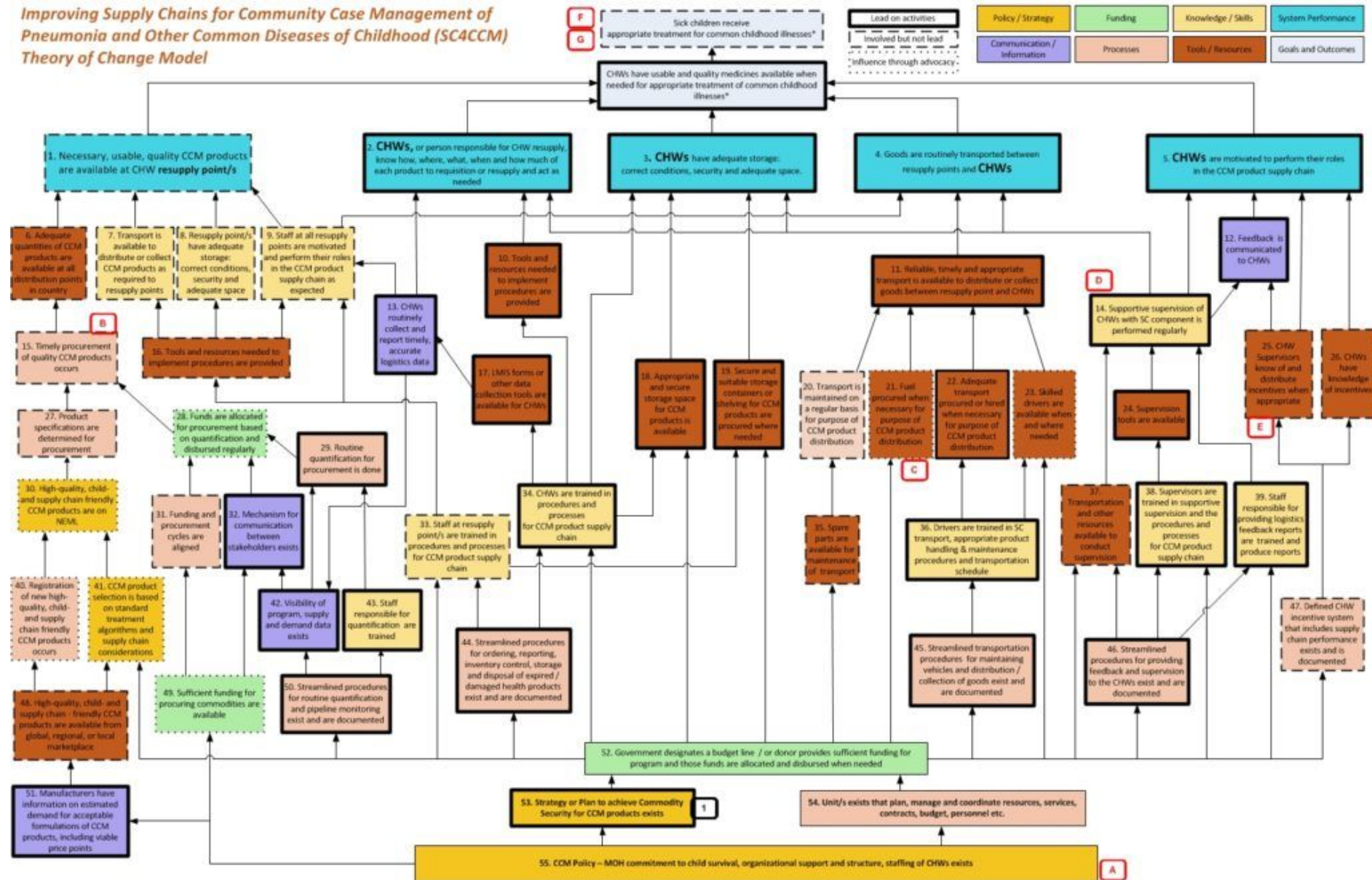
A scientific finding is $n=1$

- Even multiple studies on the same topic or phenomenon (one that's validated through replication, changes in sample population, changes in construal) is a **single finding**
- Most science doesn't even get that far!
 - Efficacy vs effectiveness
 - Validity across contexts

The application of science happens at single points

- Most programs in development are incredibly complex
 - Multiple partners, stakeholders, intervention points, target populations, and inputs, outputs and outcomes
 - Most behavioral science interventions will target a very specific linkage in a theory of change
 - But there are hundreds of potential intervention points at any given period of time.

Improving Supply Chains for Community Case Management of Pneumonia and Other Common Diseases of Childhood (SC4CCM) Theory of Change Model



A successful intervention is also $n=1$

- Company providing free weather-index seed insurance
- Struggled with take up of the free product
- We re-designed the insurance cards and improved take up, significantly and meaningfully for some of the groups
- But we still left so much potential on the table
 - Can we scale the winning intervention? Over seasons?
 - Can we improve them?
 - What happens when the intervention changes?
 - What happens on other parts of the intervention chain? (Redeeming insurance for multiple bags, re-purchasing seeds after a payout, ensuring that the farmers are the ones redeeming?)
 - What about structural interventions? (putting the card on the outside of the bag)
 - What happens when the people change?
- Even when science is applied, there's so much scale left on the table.

Social herding and simplicity increased uptake of seed insurance

+12%



+24%



But what else could have done better?

+36%

+??%



Doing things over and over and over...

Takeaways:

- A sustained, continuous drive of improvement beats a single rigorous experiment
- Science is an incredible starting point, but just the start
- Projects/products/policies are incredibly complex, which means there are vast opportunities to apply behavioral science if the conditions are right

Scaling forward

What scales?

- Talent
 - Investing in people who are rooted in the context and populations you'd like to serve
 - Talent forms an ecosystem that lives beyond your organization
- Investing in testing infrastructure
 - “Make testing easier than arguing”
 - For science
 - Big team science, leveraging participant pools in new contexts
 - For practitioners
 - Build institutional culture that values testing
- A staged approach to institution building for behavioral science
 - Quick wins
 - Building capacity to conduct behavioral research, especially within a multidisciplinary team
 - Ongoing culture of data and testing

The future of the field

Collaborations:

- When everything is behavioral science, what is behavioral science? Collaboration vs Dilution (interdisciplinary vs “nothing”)
- There are many boundaries to be traversed: Invest in South-South, North-South collaborations for transfer of ideas, talent, expertise
- Should research even be focused on the application?

Research:

- Context is the main ingredient, and it doesn't stop at countries
- Gender-energy-poverty nexus: domain inter-linkages are endless

New context requires a new approach

Thank you!

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