



IN BRIEF 6

DEBUNKING THE ENGAGEMENT 'JOURNEY':

WHAT DRIVES PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH GLOBAL POVERTY?

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13 November 2020

In this In Brief, we challenge the prevailing narrative in global development that organisations can use their outreach to take the public on an engagement 'journey,' whereby members of the public advance from a low engagement category to higher one. New research conducted shows that engagement is not a linear process: individuals in less-engaged groups are more likely to stay that way, while more engaged groups move more often.

HOW WE ENGAGE

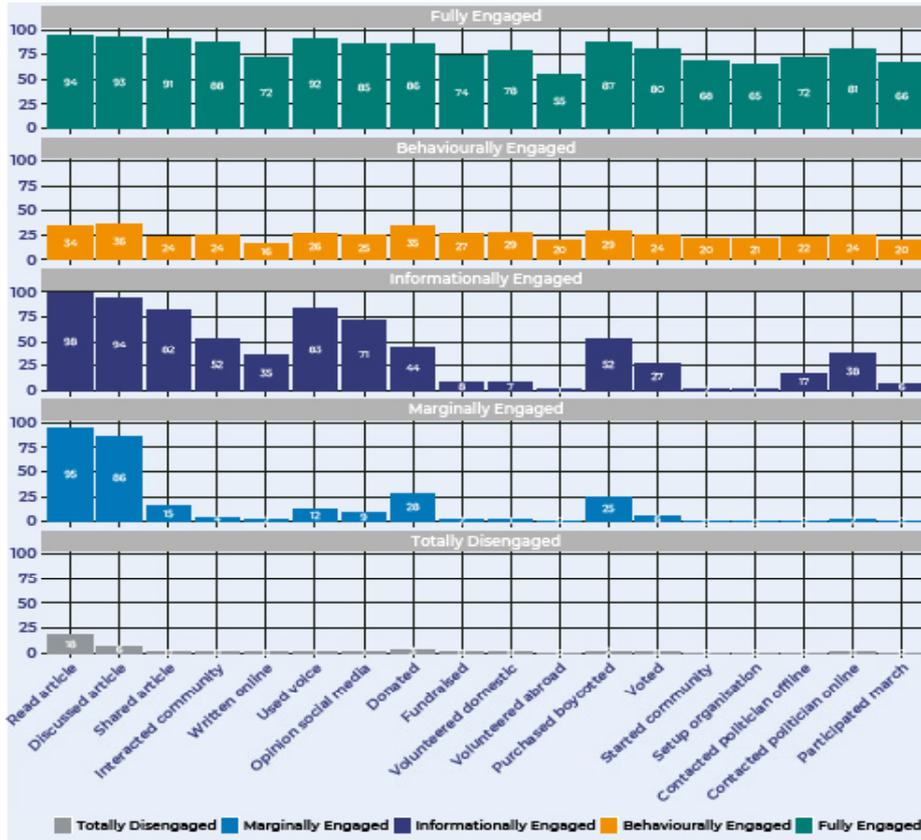
Engagement frequently comes in the form of awareness raising,

communications, campaigns or development education programmes. At a foundational level, public engagement is thought to increase the effectiveness and legitimacy of government and NGO policies, and the ability of the public to hold development organisations accountable. Until recently, there was little established research into which actions the public take when they engage, what the typical engagement journey looks like, and what factors drive engagement. Previous research focused instead on the drivers of support for aid, with less attention devoted to identifying the different ways in which the public directly take action on global poverty and how, if at all, these actions are related to one another.

KEY INSIGHTS

- Members of the public can move both up and down the engagement ladder, and even fully engaged supporters can be lost.
- The Marginally Engaged and Totally Disengaged are the 'stickiest' segments, meaning the public tend to stay in these groups.
- Engagement pathways do not follow from low-cost to high-cost actions.
- These findings also undermine the idea of a threshold of engagement: that once a high level of engagement is reached it becomes the default.
- What drives people up the engagement ladder does not necessarily drive them down, and vice versa.

FIGURE 1: ENGAGEMENT BY ACTION



Third, and importantly, despite significant efforts made by charities, NGOs and government agencies to increase public engagement with global poverty, in most cases, levels of engagement remain unchanged, or worse, are in decline. Key amongst these is the percentage of respondents saying they have donated to an organisation in the past 12 months. All four countries have experienced a drop in donations, and this is particularly acute in Germany and Great Britain. From 2013-20 the percentage donating in Germany fell from 29% to 16%, and in Britain, from 37% to 17%. The news is not all bad however, particularly in France, where there have been measurable increases in discussing news, sharing articles, purchasing/boycotting products, and voting on the issue.

Using panel data from Germany, France, the United Kingdom and the United States, the research examines 18 indicators for measuring engagement across a wide range of activities through which respondents engage with global poverty, starting with more shallow engagement and getting progressively deeper. These 18 indicators broadly reflect the idea of a 'ladder' or 'hierarchy of engagement' in terms of the time and commitment costs of taking each action. Using latent class analysis, respondents were categorised into five engagement groups: Totally Disengaged (46% of respondents), Marginally Engaged (33%), Informationally Engaged (13%), Behaviourally Engaged (6%) and Fully Engaged (2%).

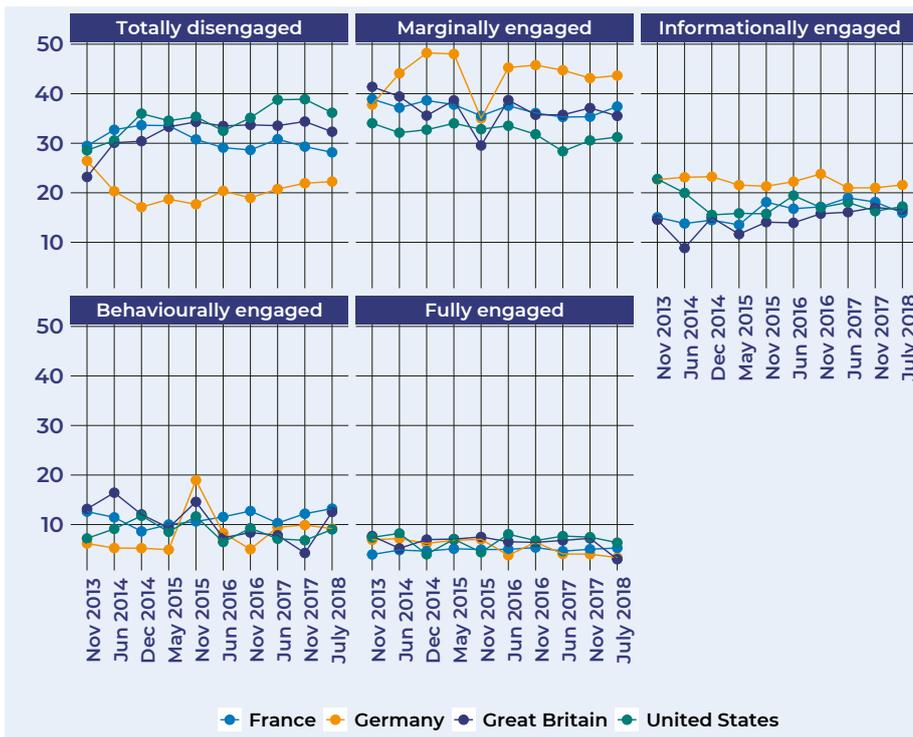
Three main findings emerged from this analysis: First, as expected, the actions that are less costly are taken more frequently.

Reading, watching, listening to news on global poverty (54%) and discussing it with friends and family (47%) are by far the most common ways of engaging across the four countries. More costly actions such as volunteering abroad (3%), setting up an organisation (3%), or going on a march/protest (4%) are far more infrequent. Second, while there is a great deal of consistency in the actions taken across countries, there are some important differences. Germans are far more likely to read, watch, listen or discuss news on global poverty, compared to the French or Americans. The British are far more likely to donate to development organisations and Americans are more likely to write to their representative on the issue.

To get a better sense of segment differences between countries, Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents in each of the engagement groups by country. Key socio-demographic groups (age, women, high income, university degree) for each segment [can be found online](#). Several key similarities stand out from these findings, despite some important differences across countries. First and most visibly,

The public are more likely to move in and out of engagement categories.

FIGURE 2: ACTIONS BY GROUPING



is that across all four countries the majority of the population are Totally Disengaged or Marginally Engaged. Second, Germany has the most engaged public. Third, the median age of Behaviourally Engaged and Fully Engaged groups is less than 40 years. This is significantly lower compared to the Marginally Engaged group where the median age 50+. Second, women are less likely to be in the more engaged groups: women are a majority of the two least-engaged groups (with the exception of the Totally Disengaged group in Britain). Third, university degrees are (on average) positively associated with higher levels of engagement across all four countries. Fourth, across the four countries the biggest difference lies in the relationship between higher income and engagement: in Germany and the US, respondents in higher income groups are more likely to be engaged, but this relationship is weaker in France and Britain.

SEGMENT STICKINESS

So, are the public 'fixed' in their engagement segments through time? Do they become more or less engaged over time? Figure 2 shows the percentage of respondents in each country by level of engagement. There are a number of clear findings. While we do see evidence of over time change, it tends to be gradual and slow moving. The exception to this is the visible spike in November 2015 where there is a sharp aggregate shift from Marginally Engaged to Behaviourally Engaged in Germany and Great Britain. This spike aligns with the hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees who arrived in Germany when the Dublin Procedure was suspended. This was accompanied with a large outpouring of concern and engagement among the population: many Germans volunteered to help welcome and house refugees or to provide blankets and shelter. But it is also noticeable that this trend appears to revert quickly to previous

levels six months later.

Figure 2 also shows that there is movement within each engagement group, but wave on wave change is relatively small. But small, aggregate-level change may mask more significant individual-level change. For example, while the overall percentage of ME group remains relatively constant, this could be the net result of entry and exit from other engagement groups.

Looking at individual-level movement provides new insights. Figure 3 illustrates individual movement within and across the five groups over the 10 waves. Here too, we see clearly that the majority of respondents fall into the TD and ME segments. A second clear finding is the stability of these segments, especially within the lower two tiers of engagement. In other words, engagement levels are relatively sticky: respondents typically stay within their current segment over time. Finally, we also learn that, contrary to the assumption of an upwardly mobile engagement journey, respondents move up and down the engagement ladder. Respondents who engage at high levels can also be lost.

In Table 1 below we look at how likely respondents in each segment are to move. The closer the number is to 1, the greater the probability a respondent will remain in the same segment. TD and ME are the most stable or sticky segments, with an average transition rate over the 10 waves of 0.75 and 0.59 in Great Britain and 0.67 in Germany (both TD and ME). Across the four countries, the IE group tends to look less like the BE/FE groups and more like the TD/ME groups in terms of stickiness: this is not surprising given that actions these groups take are relatively low-cost.

What is striking is that the more engaged segments are less stable meaning respondents are more likely to move in and out of them. Across the countries, there is less than a 0.40 probability of staying in the BE or FE groups, and in the case of the BE in Great Britain, a significantly lower probability (0.22). This suggests that it is harder to maintain the wider and more costly portfolio of actions the BE and FE do. The evidence here suggests that engagement journeys do not follow a pathway from low-cost to high-cost actions and engagement. This evidence also undermines the widely-held belief in 'thresholds' of engagement that, once reached, are sustained.

A TYPICAL JOURNEY

A closer look at individual engagement journeys over time

also revealed new, surprising patterns that further challenge the idea of a linear 'engagement journey.' In sequencing respondents' engagement behaviours over multiple survey waves, new clusters of engagement journeys emerged. Figure 4 shows the clusters of journeys, reading from left to right across rows and down, from the least to the most engaged. Clusters 1-3 show variations of the Totally Disengaged group. In cluster 1, Consistent do nothings (TD), respondents remain disengaged over the sequence, very rarely, if ever, moving out of this segment. In cluster 2, Inconsistent do nothings (TD-ME/IE), again the dominant state is TD, although we see some evidence of moving out of (and back into) TD. And in cluster 3, Inconsistent do somethings (TD-ME/BE), we see that again most journeys are typically that of being TD, but there is more

frequent movement in and out of ME groups compared to cluster 2, and individuals in these groups can become Behaviourally Engaged.

We label cluster 4 Consistent do somethings (ME), as respondents in this journey are consistently Marginally Engaged, and only very rarely become TD. Respondents in cluster 5, Inconsistent engagement (ME-IE/BE), tend to flip-flop between ME and engaged groups. Finally, the last two clusters – cluster 6 Consistent informational engagement (IE/FE) and cluster 7 Consistent behavioural engagement (BE/FE) – reflect consistently engaged segments. As shown in Figure 4, respondents in this cluster typically stay engaged, although they can move around within the IE, BE and FE groups.

The clustering of sequences allows us to infer a number of things. First, the overall story of stability

FIGURE 3: MOVEMENT BETWEEN SEGMENTS OVER TIME

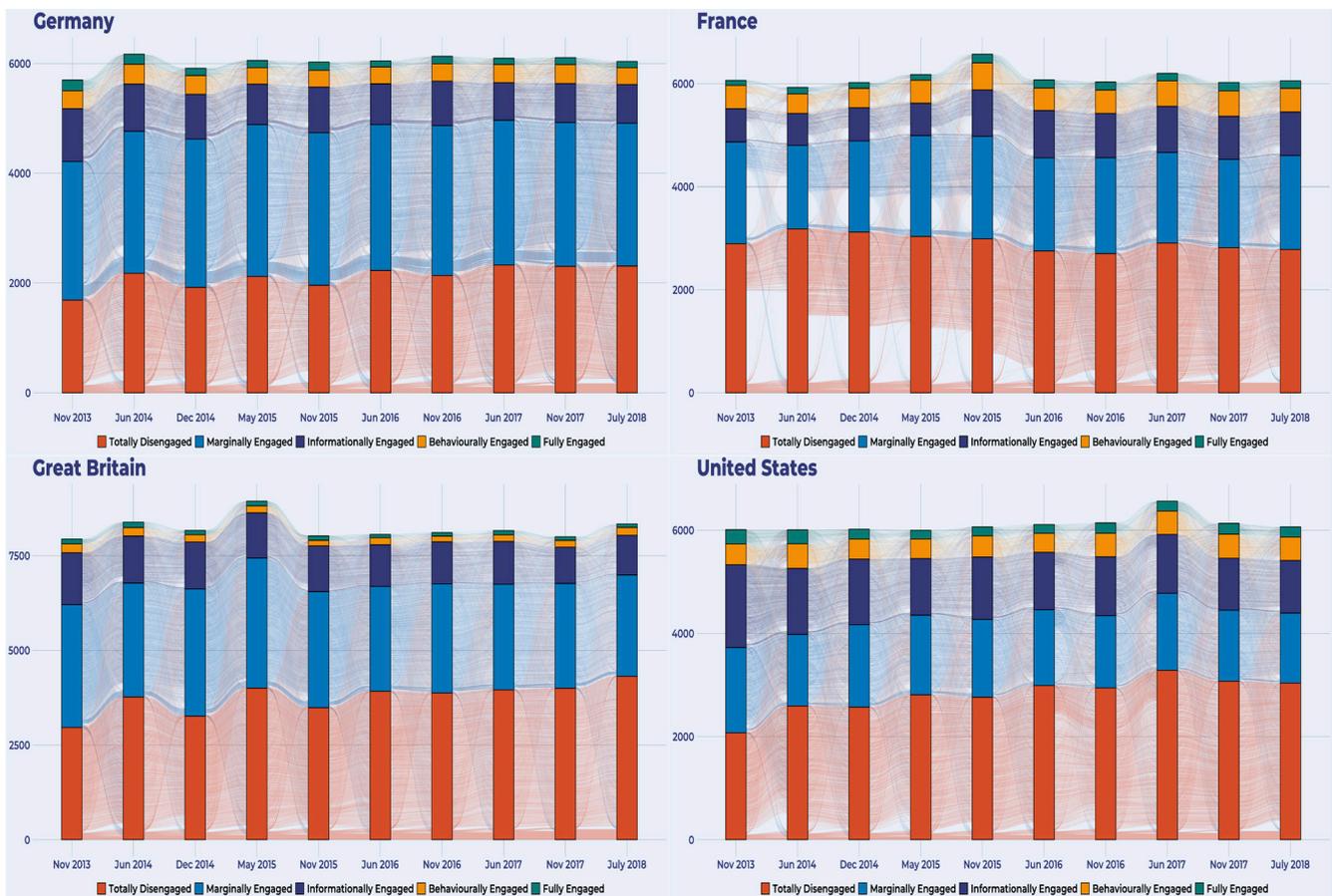


TABLE 1: LIKELIHOOD OF MOVING

France						Germany				
	TD	ME	IE	BE	FE	TD	ME	IE	BE	FE
TD	0.72	0.20	0.04	0.04	0.01	0.67	0.27	0.02	0.03	0.01
ME	0.35	0.50	0.10	0.04	0.01	0.22	0.67	0.08	0.02	0.00
IE	0.17	0.25	0.48	0.06	0.04	0.08	0.31	0.51	0.05	0.04
BE	0.27	0.18	0.11	0.39	0.05	0.23	0.23	0.13	0.35	0.05
FE	0.17	0.07	0.22	0.17	0.37	0.13	0.10	0.29	0.12	0.37
Great Britain						United States				
	TD	ME	IE	BE	FE	TD	ME	IE	BE	FE
TD	0.75	0.21	0.03	0.01	0.00	0.74	0.16	0.05	0.04	0.01
ME	0.31	0.59	0.09	0.02	0.00	0.37	0.42	0.15	0.05	0.01
IE	0.12	0.28	0.54	0.03	0.03	0.16	0.21	0.50	0.07	0.05
BE	0.30	0.26	0.18	0.22	0.05	0.31	0.19	0.18	0.27	0.04
FE	0.12	0.07	0.39	0.06	0.36	0.16	0.06	0.30	0.09	0.38

is confirmed. Four out of the seven clusters tend to see respondents staying in the Totally Disengaged or Marginally Engaged segments. While there is some movement into a neighbouring segment, it is not sustained, and respondents tend to return to their equilibrium segment. Second, while there is more movement in clusters 6-7, they tend to stay engaged. Third, cluster 5, the Inconsistently engaged, is interesting for its relative size (23%)

and mobility. These individuals are often in the ME group but do move in and out of one of the three engaged segments. Their journey is one of going back and forth as opposed to an escalating journey up the ladder of engagement.

**CONCLUSION:
WHAT DRIVES
ENGAGEMENT?**

Just as importantly as the fact that there is no single direction in the engagement journey, there are also a different set of factors that drive engagement down or up. Figure 5 shows that the effects are not symmetrical or consistent across countries: what drives people down (from ME to TD) does not necessarily drive people up (from ME to Engaged). For example, the effect of concern for global poverty is negative and significant when moving from ME to TD, but we do not find an effect for concern for ME to IE, BE or FE (although positive). Being concerned about poverty, this shows, is not sufficient to drive up engagement levels: it keeps people in a Marginally Engaged state. Guilt yielded similar results: people who say they would feel guilty over not taking action are less likely to become TD, but the effect of guilt on becoming IE, BE or FE is inconsistent across countries. The most consistent factor is personal duty: respondents with a higher sense of personal duty to tackle global poverty have a lower risk of

FIGURE 4: ACTIONS BY GROUPING

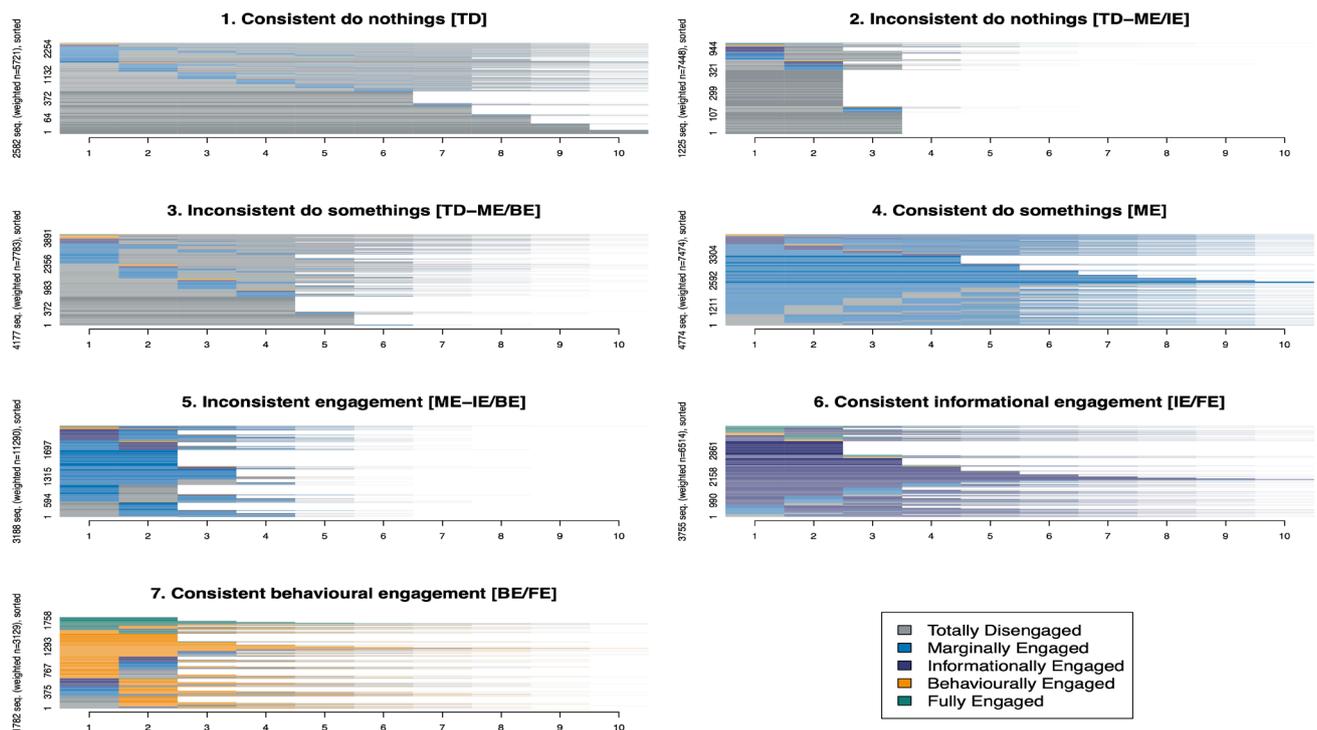
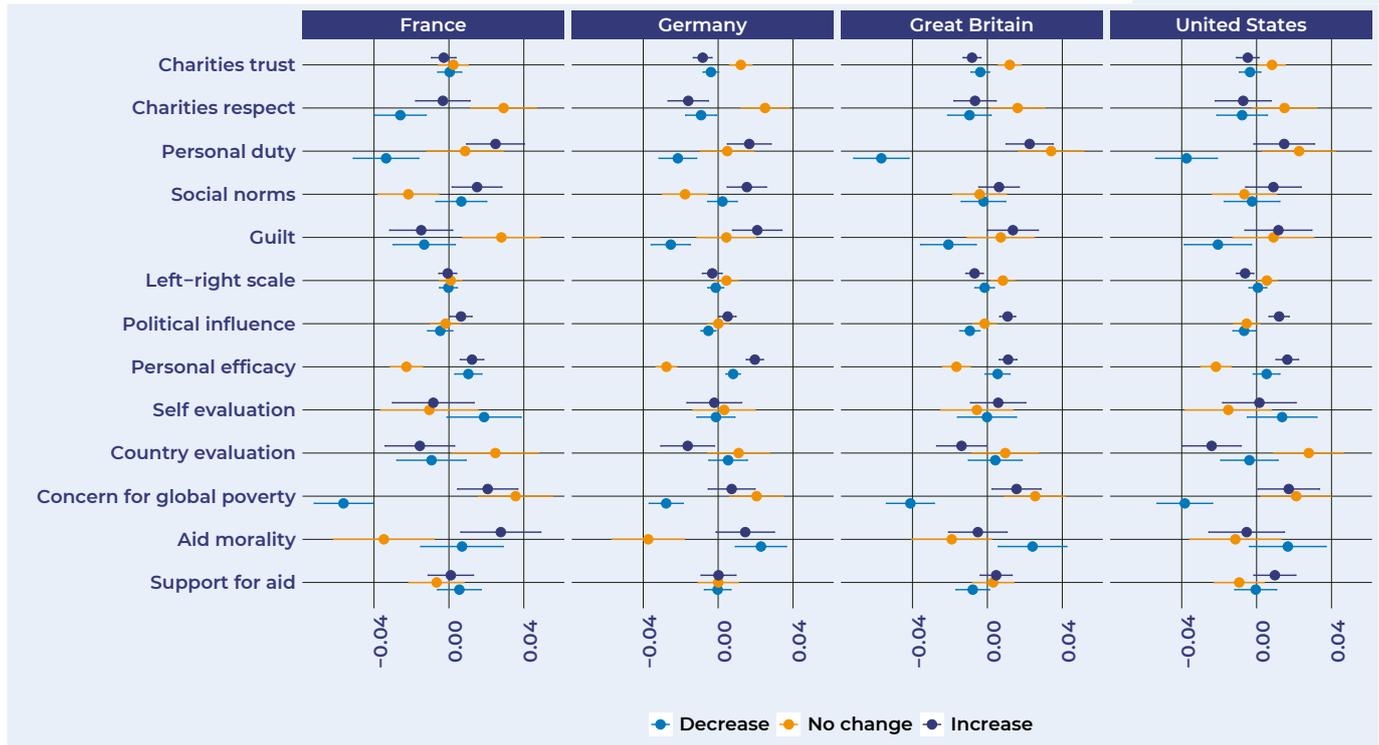


FIGURE 5: DRIVERS OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT



disengaging, and a higher chance of moving to IE, BE or FE more than staying ME.

We draw two conclusions. First, organisations that have relied on the concept of an engagement 'journey' should take note: while some citizens do climb the engagement ladder, it is a very, very small percentage, and it is certainly not the typical engagement journey across the four countries. In fact, the average engagement journey is from Totally Disengaged to Marginally

Engaged, who then tend to stay that way. The Marginally Engaged are an important audience for development NGOs, not least in terms of their relative size. They are an 'eligible' audience to deepen engagement and will remain a target for organisations' campaigns.

However, as shown here, donor publics don't behave in the same way as 'supporters', which suggests that new forms of acquisition and engagement are needed. Organisations' communications

and engagement opportunities may work well for supporters who have selected into organisations, but they may not work for a varied and diverse public. This may require investing in a more versatile (e.g. creative venues and touchpoints supported by new technology), broader (e.g. moving beyond extreme poverty to align with climate, global health and related issues) and bespoke sets of activities that fit a diverse public.

BASIS FOR ANALYSIS:

Fieldwork was conducted in France, Germany, Great Britain and the United States using YouGov's online panels with weighted nationally representative samples (n = c.6000–8000 respondents per country). The 10-wave panel was fielded twice-annually, starting in November 2013, with subsequent waves at six-month intervals.

You can find out more information about DEL research at developmentcompass.org

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This brief is brought to you by the Development Engagement Lab (DEL) based at UCL and University of Birmingham. DEL is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The views expressed in this publication are the authors' alone and are not necessarily the views of the Gates Foundation, UCL, University of Birmingham or partner organisations.

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