



Episode 53: "Changing Behaviour & Systems for Maximum Impact on the Climate Crisis"

Part 1 with Cecilia Sluga, Behaviour Change Senior Lead at Delterra

At environmental non-governmental organization Delterra, Cecilia Sluga brings her wide-ranging expertise to bear in encouraging behaviour change for the good of people and the planet. In part one of this two-episode series, Cecilia shares her journey to working on behaviour change in the non-profit sector. She also talks about how important it is to use many different levers in order to change behaviour and systems in an impactful way.

Transcript:

KIRSTIN APPELT, HOST: Welcome to this edition of Calling DIBS. I'm your host, Kirstin Appelt, Research Director with UBC Decision Insights for Business and Society, or DIBS for short. Today, we're calling DIBS on Cecilia Sluga, who is a Behaviour Change Senior Lead at Delterra, an organization that's doing really amazing work using behavioural science and other tools to affect change on things we all care about, like the climate crisis. So, I'm really excited to chat today and learn more about this great work. So welcome to the podcast, Cecilia.

CECILIA SLUGA, GUEST: Hi. Hello. Hello everyone listening.

APPELT: Maybe we can start by just having you telling us a little bit about yourself.

SLUGA: Okay. Well, my name is Cecilia. I'm a sociologist. I'm currently working in -- yes, the behaviour change space. That's how I call it, because it's kind of a bit undefined when you are implementing in territory, the limits of the discipline or the title. And I don't know what else I can tell you from my side. I don't know what's interesting.

APPELT: Maybe you can just tell us where you're Zoom-ing from. You're not one of our Vancouver guests. That's a surprise.

SLUGA: No, I'm not. I'm in Buenos Aires, working with Delterra in Argentina, in the Argentinian projects. And we have projects in many different cities of this country, which is very extensive in territory also. So, we are constantly going back and forth to our locations.

APPELT: Awesome. Well, on that note, I thought it would be good, because one thing we often talk about is just this idea that so many of us in the field of behaviour change, as you put it, have kind of winding paths where we didn't start from day one with this intention, but somehow, we found it here and we love it. And I know you have a degree in Sociology and you've worked in project management and service design. So, what brought you to BI and what was your journey to BI like?

SLUGA: Okay, it is a really long and I think different journey. I think that what it's mostly expected in this field, yes, my degree, my first degree was in sociology, I studied in a public, almost free access university, which is something really peculiar about Argentina and our university system.

And then in my career the emphasis was like really heavy social theory and really big problems of states and nations. And I was like, right from the beginning, super interested in mostly in microsociology or really face-to-face interactions in social contexts or these types of objects or curiosities that I have at that point. I was kind of someone very weird at the university because yes, everyone was like debating politics, and these really big hot topics on social theory and I was really interested in more qualitative approaches.

So, I started to work professionally, very, very young. I was like 22 years old and I became a Research Assistant and I was like really lucky because at that point I really didn't know about like quantitative research and qualitative research and all of the things that I know right now. And at that moment, I got this position as a Research Assistant for someone who was working in semiotics and communications. So totally different to sociology, super close to these face-to-face interactions and communication patterns and everything that I was quite more interested in.

And so, then I started to learn a lot about qualitative research, but not only fieldwork, but also a corpus analysis of textual, more material stuff. So, I really learned there how to work with many different objects, you know, cultural objects of many different qualities, analyzing a newspaper or actually identifying the communication pattern in an interview, in a health service, trying to find different, how do you say it in English, yeah, different patterns or different durations in their communication structure.

So, when I started in the semiotics and communications, I reached to many of the concepts that led me to understand the self, you know, the ecology of the mind, the self, how do we make decisions, how our psychic system is conformed or built in the first interactions with our parents, etcetera. How do we get to be cultured or we socialize? And then there I also found this aspect of semiotics and the production of meaning, which was like cultural anthropology from one side, and on the other side, kind of the world of the aesthetics of everyday life.

And so, at that point I was still researching and being a Research Assistant for academic purposes, but also for market research. And at that point, market research in the qualitative field was mostly about focus groups and concept testing. And this title applied social research to very pragmatic and very agile ways of researching. I was kind of learning the times of the academic on more, you know, scientific approach and more complex questions, but also learning how to really solve vast research questions or changing objectives or field work turning out to be really difficult to finish. I don't know, many, many aspects of the researching lifestyle as I call it. And then at that point, applying research for this public policy design into the artistic works, art and culture of public policies.

And this is how I started to really know about design thinking. And really, there were no formal places to study these things, in Argentina, in Buenos Aires, this was truly remote, these were things that I was really stalking people online and actually asking some scholars for papers because we didn't have free access to the university or I didn't have free trials to be able to get to journals or materials. And so, this was a really, there was a lot of effort from my side trying to pull this together.

And I'm narrating all this trajectory because I'm really amazed when I read or listen that there are programs, you know, graduate programs on behavioural or design thinking or service design. You know, this for us, they are very new disciplines. Our universities don't have that developed, as much.

And so, then I worked in a consulting project for a consumer brand, very, very global, super capitalistic, big brand. And they had a really strong team that was called “Knowledge and Insights”. And they asked for me to design a research approach to apply something that they came to me and they showed me, “Well, we have this model”. It was a hook with motivations and abilities and rewards and categories that need to be observed in fieldwork and then analyzed in a certain way to obtain a particular reading on every behaviour.

No one explained me “This is a hook and this came from this research study or this field that it's being developed in the United Kingdom, in all these countries that are really paramount of behavioural insights that they were having, like these specific government offices on this subject”. I didn't know anything, but I have in my hands this framework that I needed to design global research in 14 countries that could inform those categories. So, this is how from service design from one side from working with art and aesthetics in everyday life and working in the private consumer sector, branding, etcetera world, collapsing to this behavioural field.

Behavioural sciences, behavioural design, I didn't quite know how to call it because I knew at that point that I wasn't doing behavioural science. You know, that's very big words. I was just capturing elements of behavioural design, to complete my personal framework, which comes from a very different background. At one point I knew that I could solve mass media problems to change behaviour, that I could understand social, cultural megatrends globally that will be propelling or, you know, impending certain behaviour to develop in a certain community. I knew how to interpret social discourses. I knew how to conduct very qualitative, very quirky research, design, but I didn't know quite, exactly observe, describe and interpret behaviour. Something that is, as I understand it, very limited or shaped by the social, but occurring mostly in moments of truth where the subject is making a choice.

So those were the two dimensions that at some point collapsed in my professional career and this is how I started to incorporate the behavioural tools that I thought were most productive for the outcome or the impact that I had to comply with. And I'm very specific in explaining or being super explicit about all of these terms, because the type or dimension of the impact that it's claimed to me to have, you know, I need to recover, I don't know, one ton or a hundred tons in a year for the project to be successful. Well, then I will be designing completely different things from completely different understandings.

So, this is why I'm super explicit on “Okay, because of this impact that I have to achieve, these tools or these resources that I can use to build or design the behavioural intervention to—” And because also what we do at Delterra sometimes implies changing our behaviour, installing a new habit or hacking old habits and reshaping them into a new one.

But sometimes the scope of my work is totally outside, and you've had a lot of episodes of your podcast on this, that scope of a behavioural project, if I'm too rigid or straight on the scope of how our behavioural insights, our behavioral design approach can answer to, I'll be half of my day, working day rejecting, you know, questions or projects or things that I need to solve because there are a lot of things that I need to do that are way beyond the scope of a behavioural intervention or behavioural nudge, or whatever that might be on.

“Okay, how can I be present in the mass media, and build from mass media, the social discourse that I need to be supportive of this new behaviour that I need to install in the private space of the home, actually, because I'm working with source segregation, you know, segregating waste at home”. I'm asking my users to change behaviour that's totally in the private space of their household. And it's totally different to build a social discourse in mass media and designing the digital touchpoints. There are many, many things that I'm doing currently.

APPELT: Oh, that's so interesting. And I think what you said resonates with a lot of what I've heard from other folks and my own journey, as well, as kind of you're going along in your career and at some point you're like, "Oh, I'm working in this space. And it's like, there's a name for this space. And I didn't realize and like, oh, that we kind of all end up in the same place, although we got there via different routes".

And you started talking a little bit about Delterra. I thought for folks who don't know Delterra, it's an environmental nonprofit and I love the tagline, "Real Change at Scale." And then the mission is to, "Redesign human systems for the good of people and the planet." So, can you tell us a little bit more about maybe the vision and then get into some of the specifics?

SLUGA: Yes, I really like the tagline also, "Real Change at Scale". It has a lot of meanings that come under that claim, and it has to do with we are really hands on in our project. I really work in territory. This qualitative approach that I was describing before has to do a lot because we really implement, we research, we analyze, we design, we e-trade, we collaborate with our local partners are municipal governments, users, different stakeholders, but then we implement. We do not deliver the project and then change into another project and start a conceptual and the research base and then someone else implements. We implement.

This is the real change. We are there for the change to happen and we are also super like, I think that we have this problem-solving superpower, that we have a lot of skills, being very analytical and we are really multidisciplinary. I'm a sociologist, I'm working with engineers, I'm working with people that come from business, with the systems. The backgrounds are really, totally interesting. But then at some point we also know that everything that we do in territory and in this intensive and super close approach, we need to be able to scale it to make our impact a lot more, bigger and faster.

And, you know, we are really tackling very complex environmental challenges. I mean, we think in respects to recycling, which is the initiative, our flagship initiative, which is the initiative that I am mostly working in, on behaviour change. We are redesigning waste management systems for cities, entire cities. So, the challenge is super big and super, I don't want to be redundant with using the word "challenging", but it's a really big problem to be solving.

And there are a lot of actors involved and there are you know, we have the government on public sector, we have the user, the citizens, but also in the different aspects as citizens, as consumers, you know, as different, in their different modalities. And then we have NGOs that are also working in our space in these cities, and we have the informal sector, collection companies and we need to be working in their whole ecosystem. And we have a systemic approach.

We know that if we are changing one aspect or one dimension of the ecosystem, we are changing everything. So we need to be accountable for changing everything. We need to be thinking about, "Okay, which sectors livelihoods we are tackling", also, we are touching by modifying this very complex -- They are not also waste management, infrastructure or logistics but they are public services, are serving our residents, serving our local shops, serving our schools. This is what "Real Change at Scale" means. All these nuances, that reading these types of projects, the global south implicates.

APPELT: Yeah, wow, it just sounds so, like, so ambitious, but so amazing to see. So, you started talking a little bit about how behaviour change fits in, and you were talking a bit about the system level. But I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about why behaviour change is an important part of this, whether this project specifically or behaviour change in the context of the environmental crisis more generally.

SLUGA: Yeah, there are two things or two main aspects to this thing. Behaviour changes for us, it's not something nice to have. It's like the core. It's one of the pillars of our work. We are really into behaviour change. And this is because from a softer perhaps perspective, we really believe in change and we really believe in making it good for the planet and good for the people in the planet and trying to solve and come with innovative and scalable solutions for the issues and the real big problems that we're having as communities to thrive and to have better lives and that of quality of life. And inequality is also a very, very big issue, mostly for us.

And so all this makes us really believers on behaviour change as a way of building better communities, not also building better lives for individuals or for the household, but for the whole community. But also, there is this problem solving, more technical aspect of the issue that it's always signaling or pointing us that behaviour change, the return on investment in behaviour change, it's really the best, more cost effective than other solutions for recycling, like chemical recycling or different other potential solutions.

So, this is the two aspects we really believe in it because of the potential cascading of the benefits of changing behaviours for the good, but also because we've proven that it's cost effective. We are like really fighting or doing the thing for behaviour change to happen in a very serious way.

APPELT: Yeah. And like you said, it's such an important part, because at the root of it, most of these issues are people making small decisions that when we, like you said, at scale, they have real big impacts. So even if it's just one plastic container, but then we all have plastic containers and we're all doing it multiple times and there's so many of us. So yeah, super important. Well, maybe we can get a little more specific into one of the projects. So, you mentioned one of the big projects, the flagship projects are on waste management. So, can we hear a little bit more about that?

SLUGA: Yes, the most interesting, not the most interesting one, but the one that I have a lot more to talk about is GIRO, which is the recycling waste management program that we designed right from scratch for a mid-size city in the premise of Buenos Aires in Olavarria. It's like a six-hour bus from Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina. And when I say mid-sized city, I'm talking about 120,000 inhabitants or 45,000 households.

Whatever you want to take as a unit and what we did in Olavarria, they did not have a segregated collection service or they just have some reception banks in four, five strategic points of the city, and that was all. They were recovering less than 1% of recyclables available in the city. And we started to work together with them, with a collaboration of Delterra and the municipality, a blended team of people from Delterra and the municipality. And we actually redesigned the whole waste management system in the city. We are actually building a MRF, for a sorting starting facility, a recycling plant. We are also building the composting plant. Olavarria, it's going to be the first city, I'm almost sure about this, but at least one of the first cities in the whole, Latin, South America that is going to have organics or compostables door to door collection.

So, we are really making big changes. Building infrastructure, not only physical infrastructure like the plants but also social infrastructure, as we think of behaviour change. We are investing or cities invest a lot in plants, in machinery, in facilities, in workers, and the investment in behaviour change is another of these investment aspects that are needed and that we are redesigning from scratch with the city.

And so, in Olavarria, we are working hand-in-hand with the municipality and we are a big team on the ground. We have an office in Olavarria, we have a local team, we are seeking and giving opportunities to local talent to work with us because they really know the city, they really know their cultural nuances, they really know when we need subjects for, you know, participants for specific research task, they will really know how to get them and how to appeal to them. So, we have a really interesting team also.

So, this is a really big bet in designing and reshaping this whole waste management system. And from the behaviour change perspective, the most interesting part for me is that I have ownership and agency in the whole aspect that we can think of behaviour change in a program this big or with this ambition. We are working the mass media strategy and all the communications or more mainstream communication touchpoints, traditional media and digital media also. And we have a very detailed strategy.

We have like opinion columns in local newspaper, we have a jingle in the radio, we have radio columns in different programs and different moments of the day that we know because of the city, it's a really "driver" city, people do not walk in Olavarria. So. they are all, all the time listening to the radio in the car. We know in which moments we need to have our microsegment on waste and source segregation, etc. And we are using this layer of our program to build the cultural relevance of sorting and of recycling.

Because, you know, the city didn't have any linkage with the subject. They didn't have a program, a recycling program, or they didn't have a differentiated collection service. So, we need to build, in less than a year, like the social discourse that you will need in a three, five-year community to have the impact that we have, the ambition to have, I don't know, in a three year project. We want like 60% of households source segregating in a year. Well, that demands that the subject to be a really relevant hot topic in the public opinion, in the social media, in the local media, in the municipality, at government level, etc.

We need to build this kind of artificially because it's not there yet and we need to promote it and to make it grow faster like incubating. It's a really interesting experiment that way because we can test theories, what type of content works to build, what we need to build and to incubate the type of participation and conversation that we need to keep going in the community for this subject to be relevant, whenever we need, you know, like commitment from a pilot zone to do something.

I'm going to tell you why I'm saying pilot -- we have five pilot zones where we tested five different behaviour change approaches. So, in different pilot zones, we test different things, and they talk to each other. And there are a lot of talking in the community. And so, we would promote that. And then we are developing the digital layer. We are developing a chat bot, we are developing a micro-website from the municipal website that is really focused on behaviour change, and it doesn't go into the program, mission statement or vision, or team or anything. It's just "There you go, and we tell you what you need to do". And the different elements or touch points from the digital space, because at some point now I have a really big team of "Fieldwork Agents", as I call them, which do the last layer of our behaviour change program, which is household interventions.

We do door-to-door. And it was really difficult and counterintuitive at some point to some members of our board or some members which are not on the ground or that close to the ground that say "In the digital era, you are talking to me of having door-to-door household interventions". You know, these types of questions are the greatest ones, because those are the ones that are making you really open to explain what you are doing and why you are doing it. And put in examples of commercial strategies, religious strategies, political strategies are based on door to door. So why wouldn't we use door to door education and commitments and face to face commitments to make people recycle or segregate in a month, because we need this type of timings, a month, two months at the most.

And then I need to go to scale. I need an approach which is not that intensive in team. So, these are the type of questions that a project like Olavarria which is real change and at scale. This is the type of learnings that we are getting and insights and also, as we call it, "implementation insights" on, "Okay, how is the most cost-effective way of implementing this? How many households do I need to reach effectively to have to replicate this impact? I need to aim to 60% of households or I can aim to reach 30%, so I will need a third of the team".

You know, these types of questions that are also mounting on top of more strategic questions, scaling to other cities with a different community and social-cultural background. You know, there are interventions that one city really embraces it. And it's a really, the real game changer. And then you test it in the next city. And it's really, the users really hate it. So, and then you feel like the intervention, not by the strategic touchpoint -- in Argentina, we have door-to-door collection services mostly. So, we have the wastebaskets, you know, in front of the households.

So that's my most strategic touchpoint with the user, because it's the interface between the user on the surface, and it's super specific, and particular of my service, you know, the waste collection. There's no other service or no other, yes, municipal service fighting for that communication space. You know, because if I go to the streets, to billboards in the streets or any other municipal channels, I'm fighting against a lot of other public services for that strategic space. So the wastebasket is mine, you know. This is one of our most interesting insights because, okay, which is my exclusive space. My exclusive touchpoint, the wastebasket. Okay. And it's public, but it's also private because it's public because it's in the sidewalk. But it's private because it's from the household.

And so, you make an intervention in the wastebasket. And some cities loved it. They love it. They really interpret what we are trying to design. They are you know, "I really get it. I can see it from the car and I can see it from home, from my window. And I can feel when I go walking by my neighbourhood, I mean the wind, they fly in the wind" etcetera. And there are cities that they tear it apart and gave them to their field work agents like "you can spend your money on something else." Um, okay. And then you need to go back to research to find out, "Okay, you do not like this intervention. But I need this space. And if I do not have in my strategy, this touchpoint, where do I go? Where is this touchpoint in this community?"

And well, these are the type of questions that we are behind trying to answer and trying to improve to get better impact on faster and more scalable and more standardized which are really ugly words I know, but sometimes something that is standardized you have quite some sense of freedom to intervene it or to reshape it a little bit can be something that you can take from one city and just go and implement it in a larger scale than a pilot in another city, with a really nice or comfortable level of certainty that that intervention is going to work. Sorry. I talk a lot.

APPELT: No, it's amazing. No, I love so many of the things that you brought up there, like the idea that I think what's kind of unique about your work is because of the partnerships you have, is you have so many moving parts and so many levers at your discretion. Also, like a lot of times we have like, you can work on this tiny little piece of it, but you're able to touch all the different facets from the design, to the messaging, to the digital to the face-to-face. And that's such a unique opportunity. But then at the same time, like you said, so many questions to answer and so much to do and so, wow, just really a rich space to work in.

SLUGA: Yes, it's super challenging, but, in a good way. I'm always entertained. I always have a design challenge because I know we are in a behavioural insights space; I really know I'm a super big fan of this field. You gave me a lot of satisfaction in how to have toolkits, categories that I can give a team and a very junior team and say, "Okay, you need to analyze what you've seen in this household, in this ethnographic observation, and you need to translate it into these categories and analyze the motivation, analyze the barrier, analyze the drivers, analyze the incentives, I don't know whatever we can define the categories that we're going to use".

I'm a really big fan of behavioural insights, but my drive, my thirst is for design challenges and sometimes I use things from service design and sometimes for visual design and sometimes behaviour. But in my space, behaviour change in Delterra, with the type of projects and the maturity that the projects and that the

organization has, it's keeping me amused the whole day, with different challenges in different cities, with very different problems. But they are actually the same, you know, they're actually the same problem at the end because they all have problems with the operations. They all have perhaps -- they have the installations of the MRFs, cities from scaling. Not Olavarria, that was the flagship program from scratch and they didn't have a solution.

We are currently working, scaling with cities that did have a certain level of development, differentiated collection service. At least they have differentiated collection route, or something like that. And so, we find there that they have operations problems for complying with collection and having a consistent service. We also have a lot of, nevertheless whatever the rational scientific control trial results, sometimes there are political positions that have nothing to do with which is most effective or sometimes even better for the user. You know, because I'm, as a designer, I'm the advocate for the user experience in the design table.

I would always advocate for what is better or easier or comforting for a user because I'm in behaviour change and I'm trying to support every one of our citizens having to transition from a traditional waste disposal service where you put everything together and you never deal with the bag and you do not know what happens to that bag of waste and that it's something that it's also disgusting and awful for you to manage in your household.

We are transitioning, this scenario, this paradigm of dealing with waste into source segregation, which is a cleaner approach where you have only one-third of your mixed waste that you used to have. So, managing the waste at home is just something that turns out to be something that you deal every day to, something that you perhaps have to deal once a week. And there is a value proposition in our transition. But you have to go with the user and you have to facilitate this transition to the user. So that's my job. That's what I'm defending there.

And also, we are trying not to, the limits in designing our behaviour intervention to facilitate a transition in a habit for a user. It's that I do not want to spoil them also or make them used to tools or, you know, triggers that they are not going to be there to last, if I cannot, you know, go with that commitment, perhaps like financial incentives or giving away colourful bags to dispose recyclables, if then I'm not going to be there to support you in that journey till the end, I do better and do not introduce that element in our relationship because then I will be failing you.

And this type of thing we are also taking into account, because we are defining not just a behavioural intervention or one nudge, a journey where you start our journey being a regular citizen and you end our journey being a recycler. There are a lot of elements there that we need to take into account also.

APPELT: Cecilia has so many wonderful insights to share that we've divided them into two episodes. While this first episode has focussed on Cecilia's journey to behaviour change and the different tools she uses to change behaviour and systems, the second episode will focus on how to partner with individuals and organizations to develop, trial, and scale solutions for behaviour change. Stay tuned for this and more in the next episode. In the meantime, thank you for joining this episode of Calling DIBS.