



Research and Documentation Centre

Cahier 2022-2

Migrating EAST

*The potential application of
behavioural insights in Dutch
migration policy*

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S.M. Noyon
J. Cui (ass.)

Cahier

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Executive summary

How can Dutch policymakers manage migration more effectively? Migration policymakers are confronted with issues that prove hard to solve using traditional policy tools. Against the background of an increasing interest in behavioural policy interventions within the Ministry of Justice, the present study asked whether behavioural insights could be of relevance to the field of migration policy as well.

Based on a combination of reviews of literature and policy documents as well as an original survey of European migration services and an expert interview, the study set out to answer three main questions:

- 1 How are behavioural insights applied in Dutch public policy and what lessons can we draw from this?
- 2 Does the nature of migrant decision-making lend itself to the application of behavioural insights and is this done already in migration policy abroad?
- 3 Is Dutch migration policy suited to the application of behavioural insights?

The analysis follows the UK Behavioural Insights Team's EAST model (Service et al., 2014), which posits that desired behaviour can be encouraged by making it Easy, Attractive, Social, and Timely.

Results

Considering behavioural interventions in Dutch public policy in terms of the EAST model, what stands out is that behavioural insights have been applied targeting a wide range of different audiences. There does not seem to be an obvious reason why migrants should be an exception. A recurring pattern among the reviewed examples is that the interventions target very specific behaviours (e.g. increasing uptake of preschool education among low-income parents) rather than large abstract themes (e.g. social inequality). By analogy, this suggests that behavioural insights could be applied to specific issues in migration policy as well (e.g. 'obtaining valid documents' rather than 'return migration').

Turning to the field of migration, we find that there are many commonalities between the nature of migrant decision-making and the EAST model that would allow for the application of behavioural insights. More specifically, migrant decision-making tends to be influenced by the simplicity and attractiveness of the available options, is highly dependent on social factors, and is time sensitive in several respects. This suggests that migration policy would be suited to the application of behavioural insights, and we indeed find several examples of behavioural interventions in the field of migration policy from across the world. This is a further indication that behavioural insights could be applied in Dutch migration policy. Interestingly, the overview of behavioural interventions in international migration policy also reveals that often, behavioural insights are applied unintentionally.

Finally, the analysis suggests that the context of Dutch migration policy lends itself to the application of behavioural insights. In the Dutch migration policy domain, a number of issues persist where the legal limits of adopting further (restrictive) measures have been reached. This would allow for the introduction of behavioural

insights. A 'quick scan' of a number of specific policies reveals that, to some extent, behavioural elements have already been incorporated into Dutch migration policy. However, there is still room for the further development of a behavioural agenda.

A call for a systematic approach

The finding that behavioural insights are commonly applied unintentionally in (international) migration policy suggests that it is done intuitively, and therefore we would not need a policy paradigm change in order to incorporate behavioural insights into Dutch migration policy. While this may be a positive take on the unintentional nature of some behavioural interventions, it also begs the question of whether or to what extent these have been applied following a careful (scientific) approach. Ideally, the application of behavioural insights follows a systematic procedure that also includes ethical considerations. Especially when applied to a group with a vulnerable position vis-à-vis the government, such as migrants, ethics must not be disregarded when applying behavioural insights. Moreover, behavioural policy tends to be the outcome of an iterative process including (series of) experimentation. Whether it is ethically acceptable to experiment with migration policy will depend on the specific design and the ultimate goal of an intervention.

An additional advantage of adopting a systematic approach to the application of behavioural insights is that it allows for the evaluation of the impact of an intervention, in addition to the process itself. In our quest to gain a better grasp of the potential for behavioural insights in migration policy, having an understanding of what does and does not work is indispensable.

In short, a systematic approach to behavioural insights is important for ethical as well as analytical reasons.

Conclusion

In summary, our knowledge of behavioural policy as well as insights into migrant decision-making and the Dutch policy context suggest that there is potential for the application of behavioural insights in Dutch migration policy. When doing so, policymakers should take ethical considerations that apply to migrants and to behavioural policy more generally into account. To this end, a systematic approach is indispensable, as are evaluations of existing behavioural efforts in migration policy. Future research should see to this.

On a final note, behavioural insights should be seen as complementary to traditional policy tools. Certainly, they can form a valuable addition to the public policy toolkit – but only when used in conjunction with, rather than at the expense of, more traditional measures.

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