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Institutionalising Behavioural Science in Climate: Issues and Trends

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Public institutions worldwide are turning to behavioural science to help accelerate climate action, yet the field lacks a clear account of how behavioural units are currently working on climate issues and how they can be most effective. This article reviews climate-related activities across leading behavioural units and identifies four issues shaping their impact: how lessons are shared, where interventions are placed within systems, how interventions are designed, and how academics and policymakers collaborate. We outlined four major themes to guide behavioural units seeking to contribute more meaningfully to climate mitigation and adaptation. The article concludes by outlining the broader ethical and governance questions that arise when governments seek to shape citizen behaviour in the context of accelerating climate risk. Together, these insights aim to support practitioners in building behavioural science capabilities that can contribute to climate change initiatives at scale.

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1. INTRODUCTION: HOW BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE UNITS ARE ENGAGING WITH CLIMATE CHANGE

Over the past fifteen years, behavioural science units have been established and integrated into leading global government organisations (1). These units have become prevalent in public policymaking, applying behavioural insights to pressing social challenges such as health, environmental protection, education, and civic participation.

Increasingly, behavioural units are being tasked with addressing climate change, one of the most complex and urgent social issues of our time. In a recent major review of the scope and functioning of behavioural science teams globally, 'the environment' is ranked as the third most common focus area, following health and social policies (1). There is a growing body of research demonstrating that addressing climate change is as much a behaviour change challenge as a material challenge (2–5). However, little research has examined the practical realities that behavioural units face in climate-related projects, nor how their role might evolve in the coming decade.

Behavioural science is now an established component of public policy, but its potential to support large-scale and sustained behaviour change relevant to climate mitigation remains underexploited. This article examines how institutionalised behavioural units are currently addressing climate change and identifies emerging practices that may strengthen their effectiveness.

In particular, in this article, we review the institutional forms that behavioural units take and the climate-related projects they are engaged in. We then introduce the emerging issues units are facing today in climate projects, including knowledge sharing among units, places of intervention, intervention design, and collaboration between academics and policymakers. To address these, we summarise four tenets of success that could help behavioural units to effectively address climate change in the coming decade. Lastly, we conclude by reflecting on broader ethical considerations that behavioural units and public policy experts may confront as climate projects become more prominent and urgent. In particular, we reflect on the role of governments in climate governance, different viewpoints concerning responsibility, and the utility of multi-level governance deliberation. In summary, the article highlights the contribution behavioural units can make to supporting collective changes that governments are uniquely positioned to enable and underscores the importance of behaviour change in addressing climate change.

2. THE BEHAVIOURAL UNITS ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE

2.1 SCOPE OF THE UNITS DISCUSSED IN THE PAPER

Behavioural units, sometimes referred to as Behavioural Public Policy (BPP) teams, are one or more experts knowledgeable in behavioural economics, social psychology, sociology, or adjacent fields dedicated to applying behavioural insights to government or international priorities (1). Secondary data summarising the structure, experience, and work of behavioural units in climate is limited to a small handful of grey literature reports, government websites, and the occasional academic paper.

To understand the broader character of the units taking on climate work, we selected behavioural units that we believed to be 1) influential in public policymaking, 2) established within an organisation, 3) demonstrated behavioural science as a core competency, and 4) published work on climate interventions (Table 1). We identified nine overarching organisations and seventeen case groups in all, including their sub-agencies and departments; however, this list is not exhaustive, and inevitably, some organisations fitting these criteria may have been overlooked (Table 2). Next, to illustrate the types of behavioural interventions being undertaken in climate-related work, we examined examples from a range of governmental and international behavioural units. A summary of these examples is provided in a technical appendix, as the main purpose of this section is to describe the institutional landscape rather than to offer a systematic empirical analysis.

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1.	**Influential in this space:** Be an influential public or private entity that addresses public policy, usually a well-known entity.
2.	**Established within an organisation:** Have an established behavioural science unit or a formal behavioural science role that's embedded within the organisation.
3.	**Demonstrated behavioural science as a core competency:** Publicly indicate behavioural science is a core part of the organisation's approach to public policy projects.
4.	**Published work on climate interventions:** At least two or more climate change projects accessible to the public with a clear and obvious use of behavioural science.

Table 1 Desirable qualities for a case study organisation.

For each behavioural unit, we reviewed their climate change projects or sustainability initiatives that were explicitly aimed at decarbonisation, environmentalism, or climate mitigation. For example, encouraging plant-based meals, transitioning to clean energy, reducing consumption, adopting circular fashion practices, preserving ecosystems, or promoting plastic recycling all qualify as climate change projects. We selected case studies most closely aligned with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) *Avoid-Shift-Improve* Framework (2), which summarises 60 opportunities for socio-cultural, infrastructural, and technological change.

1.	The United Nations (UN), including the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the World Bank Group (WBG)
2.	The UK Government, including the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), the UK Department for Transport (DfT), and the Climate Change Committee (CCC)
3.	The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)
4.	The Australian Government
5.	The European Commission
6.	The Canadian Government
7.	The Singaporean Government
8.	The Dutch Government
9.	The New Zealand Government

Table 2 Case study organisations included in the article.

To understand the current state of behavioural units, we reviewed 16 recently published reports on the institutionalisation of behavioural science in leading organisations worldwide (Table 3). Collectively, they summarise the emergence and evolution of behavioural units within institutions between 2010 and 2025, and the role behavioural science can play in addressing climate change. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these reports were primarily produced by the same organisations identified in our case studies, such as the United Nations, the World Bank Group, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the European Commission. We also collected academic and consultant contributions from organisations such as the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) and the Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations (CAST). However, little of the current literature reports on the latest approaches, and only a few – predominantly in the UK – specifically touch on climate change. This list is also not exhaustive and may have omitted key reports or papers.

1.	UK Cabinet Office & BIT, 'MINDSPACE' Report (2010)
2.	UK House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee, 'Behaviour Change' Report (2011)
3.	OECD, 'Regulatory Policy and Behavioural Economics' Report (2014)
4.	World Bank, World Development Report 'Mind, Society, and Behavior' (2015).
5.	European Commission, 'Behavioral Insights Applied to Policy' Report (2016)
6.	OECD, 'Behavioural Insights and Public Policy: Lessons from Around the World' (2017)
7.	World Bank, 'Behavioral Science Around the World: Profiles of 10 Countries' Report (2019)
8.	World Bank & OECD, 'Behavioral Science Around the World: Volume II' Report (2020)
9.	UN, Behavioural Science Report (2021)
10.	UN ESCAP, 'Applying Behavioural Science to Advance Environmental Sustainability' Report (2021)
11.	BIT, How to build a Net Zero society (2023)
12.	CAST, 'The Implications of Behavioural Science for Effective Climate Policy', Output 1 (2023)
13.	CAST, 'The Implications of Behavioural Science for Effective Climate Policy', Output 2 (2023)
14.	UNDP, 'Harnessing Behavioural Insights to Tackle Complex Development Challenges' Report (2024)
15.	F. Naru, 'Behavioural Public Policy Bodies: New Developments and Lessons'(2024)
16.	OECD, 'Mind Shift, Green Lift' Report (2025)

Table 3 Literature reviewed.

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2.2 THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF BEHAVIOURAL UNITS

While the use of behavioural science in public policy goes back decades, the institutionalisation of behavioural units is relatively new. The earliest and most prominent example of an institutionalised behavioural unit is the UK's BIT, established in 2010, in part due to the popularisation of behavioural science through the bestselling book, *Nudge* (1). In the early 2010s, behavioural units were mainly established in the United States and Western Europe, but have since flourished in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and Singapore (1). Units have proliferated within national governments, international organisations, and multilateral bodies, including the OECD, World Bank, the United Nations, and the European Commission, to name but a few (6, 7).

A 2024 study suggests as many as 631 behavioural units are currently operating around the world. Europe contains roughly half of all the units combined (54%), followed by North America with 19%, Asia with 8%, the Middle East and Africa with 8%, Oceania at 7%, and South America at 4% (1). Governmental units account for the majority of behavioural units (51%), compared with academic (20%) or private (17%) units. In the Global North, where most established behavioural units are based, government bodies are more often supported by academic institutions (1). In contrast, newer units in the Global South tend to receive greater support from the private sector.

Most behavioural units describe themselves as multidisciplinary, working closely with experts in adjacent disciplines such as law, communications, economics, psychology, and sociology, or with experts in general public policy (1). The structure of behavioural units varies, but they fall into three general categories: centralised, decentralised, and hybrid (8). Those centralised within executive offices, such as the Australian Government, operate as one unit deployed on various projects (6). Decentralised networks spread across ministries, such as in the Netherlands, often have specialised teams within government departments (6). Hybrid public–private forms share traits of both centralised and decentralised models, such as the now independent BIT agency from the UK government (6). We found decentralisation and hybrid models particularly popular among the organisations we reviewed, though this is likely unrelated to climate change projects and instead reflects a trend among more established behavioural science organisations that have evolved beyond the centralised model.

The proliferation and growth of these units demonstrate how behavioural science is no longer an occasional tool used by policymakers but an established component of policymaking. There are six general steps in the policy cycle: problem identification, problem analysis, policy design, policy assessment, policy implementation, and monitoring and evaluation (4). Recent review papers now argue that behavioural science has an important role to play in every stage of the public policy cycle (4, 9), yet traditionally, behavioural science has only been applied to the middle or later stages of this cycle: policy assessment and implementation. For example, in 2024, the Behavioural Economics Team of the Australian Government (BETA) designed and tested five policy interventions aimed at encouraging Australians to upgrade their homes' energy performance, so reducing their home running costs and greenhouse gas emissions (10).

At least one study published in 2024 finds that behavioural units are now being involved more often in the earlier stages, such as diagnosing behaviour problems and assessing existing policies and programmes (1). The European Commission, for example, conducted a literature review in 2022 to understand the behavioural factors that hinder or enable EU farmers' adoption of sustainable agricultural practices before proposing stronger policy options in the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) (11).

A smaller number of units stated that they were involved towards the end of the policy cycle, with such activities as evaluations and follow-up assessments, highlighting a gap in planning follow-up assessments from the outset (1). Overall, however, it is still the case that behavioural science is rarely systematically and fully integrated into the complete public policy cycle for most organisations (4), legitimising the common concern of behavioural research not yet being routinely applied across all stages of the policy cycle.

While most units described a focus on 'wicked' problems, or interconnected, complex cultural problems, not every behavioural unit directly addresses climate change (1). This is likely due to a lack of demand for climate interventions from a particular government, insufficient

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funding for such projects, a lack of political support for implementing interventions, or a combination of all three. Furthermore, some governments may undertake this work but refrain from commenting on it publicly for various reasons. The German Government, for example, established its behavioural insights unit *Wirksam Regieren,* or Citizen-Centred Government, in 2015. As an EU country, Germany has publicly committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 55% by 2030 (12). However, no publicly available case studies demonstrate the explicit use of behavioural science in climate-related public policy projects, thereby excluding them from this analysis.

The behavioural units addressing climate change were generally large, Western, and well-funded. Some Asia-Pacific government organisations were included, but African and South American organisations were almost entirely omitted due to the limited public documentation of their work. Very large organisations such as the United Nations were represented by multiple sub-agencies with explicit climate focus areas, including the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). A few smaller single-agency governmental divisions with a climate mandate were also included, such as New Zealand's Energy Efficiency and Conservation Authority.

2.3 EMPLOYING BEHAVIOUR CHANGE IN CLIMATE PROJECTS

Reaching net-zero emissions by 2050 will require an economic and societal transition on an enormous scale and at a rapid pace, necessitating behavioural change (4). As climate change research evolves and urgency increases, behavioural science is being recognised as a critical component in creating lasting social and economic change (4). Indeed, a recent OECD report states, 'The green transition is a human behaviour transition' (4, p. 8). In the UK, for example, the Climate Change Committee estimates 62% of the necessary emissions reductions depend directly on behaviour such as technology adoption and lifestyle changes, though BIT suggests the remaining 38% also depend on social and behavioural constraints to some extent (5).

However, there is heterogeneity between global governmental approaches and leadership in climate change as it pertains to public policy. Developed economies tend to have a strong public policy focus, well-funded departments and programmes, established behavioural units, and political pressure to address climate change. One notable exception is the United States. The Social and Behavioural Sciences Team (SBST) was established by executive order under the Obama administration in 2015, discontinued under the first Trump administration, revived under the Biden administration, and subsequently dismantled again under the second Trump administration, illustrating the vulnerability of behavioural science units to political priorities. Less developed countries are likely to lack at least some of these components. They are also less likely to have behavioural units engaged in climate projects, making this a phenomenon primarily found in developed countries at present. As the consequences of climate change are felt more urgently and deeply by communities in developing economies, this may change.

Current research suggests two interconnected trends: behavioural units engaged in climate projects are 1) focused on the general public and 2) target individual behaviour change.

A focus on the public

Across the organisations reviewed, most projects aimed to change the behaviours of the public, be it consumers or citizens. A Cambridge study examining behavioural units in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands found 87% of units reported the public as the target of their behavioural influence (13). The case studies cover a wide range of behaviours, including increasing recycling and waste reduction, adopting renewable energy options or green appliances, shifting towards public transport or electric vehicles, choosing plant-based diets, and encouraging circular fashion. One example of this is Canada's Policy Innovation Hub, which tackles many of these behaviours together under the Program of Applied Research on Climate Action (PARCA). This programme encompasses a multi-year initiative to conduct a nationally representative climate action segmentation study, track sustainable behaviours in longitudinal studies, and conduct in-field testing with coastal communities (14). In another example, the Singaporean government increased non-car travel in 2018 by targeting students and their parents through gamification, creating and reinforcing new travel social norms (15).

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Occasionally, other stakeholders, like farmers, were the target of behavioural interventions. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), for example, used demonstration plots to nudge subsistence farmers in Zambia to adopt climate-smart agriculture practices (16). This suggests that the dominant focus of behavioural science has been on consumer-level mitigation behaviours with climate adaptation projects largely absent from climate change projects today. At least one UK review found little evidence of behavioural interventions that meaningfully address climate adaptation (3). Such research provides promising evidence of partial effects within defined domains. Further work is clearly needed on how this scales up over multiple domains.

Targeting individual behaviours

The vast majority of the behavioural interventions discussed in reports and case studies target the individual decision level. In the United Kingdom, the most frequently used interventions are information campaigns, framing, and default-based interventions (3). The Behavioural Insights Network Netherlands (BIN NL), for example, improved purchase intentions for second-hand clothing in 2022 through a pre-loved fashion campaign, which included a fair featuring circular pop-ups and influencer partnerships in two European cities (17).

A smaller set of interventions occurs at the institution or organisational level, such as redesigning layouts or processes to make sustainable behaviour easier. For instance, BIT, the Emirates Foundation, and Accuro reduced food waste in hotel staff cafeterias by 29–44% by altering the food environment (5). This included reducing portion sizes, displaying behaviourally informed messages, and publishing comparative progress between chains in a weekly tracker.

Finally, the smallest set of interventions targets the systemic level, embedding behavioural principles into laws, incentives, and infrastructure. We can see evidence of current laws influenced by behavioural science principles, such as the UK's soft drinks levy in 2016 (18) or the Inflation Reduction Act passed in 2021 in the United States (19). However, laws and taxes are complex, long-term efforts often involving multiple stakeholders, making it hard to evidence clear, attributable input from a behavioural unit.

A literature review of UK behavioural science approaches in climate policy cited policymakers' preference for individual-level interventions, which may explain the popularity of this intervention type (3). They are comparatively easier to trial experimentally, more cost-efficient to implement, and supported by a more extensive empirical evidence base. The literature review also notes that their popularity may reflect a political reluctance to constrain or be seen as constraining lifestyle habits (3).

It is therefore likely that the majority of climate change projects in public policy today are almost exclusively focused on influencing citizens' behaviours through individual-level interventions.

3. EMERGING ISSUES

As the impacts of climate change become more apparent, the number of behavioural units engaged in climate action projects is likely to increase, as is the need for effective interventions. We identified four emerging issues that behavioural units are grappling with in relation to climate change projects: how to disseminate comparative learnings, where to intervene in a system, how to design effective interventions, and how to collaborate as experts.

3.1 COMPARATIVE LEARNINGS

Many behavioural units acknowledge the importance of disseminating lessons both internally and externally to enhance their own effectiveness and to learn from others (1, 4, 9). They have cited systematic sharing and the comparison of insights across behavioural science projects as essential for scaling interventions and maximising their impact. The OECD, the World Bank, and the European Commission conducted one of the earliest comprehensive mapping exercises of behavioural science in public policy in 2014, contributing a collective knowledge base of the conditions under which behaviourally informed policies succeed or fail (7). The United Nations Behavioural Science Group is one of the largest groups of its kind in the world, bringing together over 1,000 professionals from more than 110 countries interested in the application of behavioural science. It coordinates workshares across the 25 agencies that are a part of the UN Innovation Network in the form of workshops, webinars, and a living library of case studies (20).

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However, some units are also expressing concerns that barriers to knowledge sharing persist. The OECD reports that some practitioners are hesitant to publish their findings publicly due to data sensitivity concerns (7). Others demonstrate a bias towards reporting positive outcomes, underreporting instances of projects that had no effect or unintended consequences (7). It has been suggested by at least one institution that the absence of international reporting standards makes comparisons between case studies difficult. The European Commission's Joint Research Centre has suggested adopting its *Test, Learn, Adapt, Share* methodology to systematise the evaluation of policy interventions through Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) and create a universal standard (9).

Climate change projects pose a particular challenge in terms of knowledge sharing and dissemination. While climate change is a global issue, effective public policy solutions are localised to fit the needs and environmental advantages of each community, making solutions unique and generalisations more difficult at a global level (21). Furthermore, behavioural science case studies typically report on short-term, narrowly defined outcomes, whereas meaningful decarbonisation requires sustained cultural and behavioural transformation over the long term. The Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations (CAST), for example, cites a lack of evidence of long-term behavioural intervention effects in climate change projects in the UK (3), illustrating a gap in measured long-term outcomes.

Looking ahead, behavioural units may benefit from further research into the standardisation of reporting practices and the development of rigorous methodologies capable of capturing the long-term adoption and effectiveness of interventions.

3.2 PLACES TO INTERVENE

There is a nascent but growing conversation in the UK about what drives sustainable behaviours and the effectiveness of the type of behavioural interventions designed. In their 2023 report, *How to Build a Net Zero Society*, BIT put forth the 'upstream-downstream' model to examine human behaviour within a system (5). The model suggests three intervention levels: 'downstream', where an individual makes choices of their own volition based on personal preferences, knowledge, or biases; 'midstream', where choice environments exert a strong influence; and 'upstream', where the mechanics of a system heavily influence behaviour. This metaphor draws a parallel between behaviour and swimming in a stream, in that a person is free to swim in any direction, but the current may enable them or constrain them to a greater or lesser degree. Thus, BIT argues that more nuanced language is needed to discuss the influence of systemic factors on individual behaviour and, therefore, the placement and design of behavioural interventions.

Another leading authority on climate change behaviours in the UK, CAST, has also been vocal about the need for intervention diversification to reach net zero. Across a series of commissioned reports by the Climate Change Committee (CCC), they report that almost all interventions fall within BIT's 'downstream' category (3). Indeed, the 2025 OECD report *Mind Shift, Green Lift* notes that upstream behavioural science applications remain comparatively rare (4).

They also found that individual-level determinants, such as knowledge in information campaigns, exert comparatively limited influence on behaviour change when compared with broader social and structural factors (3). Behavioural interventions, such as defaults or nudges, may produce medium-sized effects while in place but actors tend to revert to their original form once the intervention is removed, limiting long-term impact. They therefore argue that downstream interventions are necessary but, on their own, wholly insufficient to achieve the scale of change needed to meet the UK's net-zero goals.

CAST and at least one OECD report call for a greater emphasis on mid- to upstream-level interventions that address and remove barriers to change (3, 7). The BIT agrees, confirming in their report that upstream measures, such as regulation or infrastructure investment, can be effective in achieving widespread behavioural change (5). BIT states it would be 'profoundly wrong to ignore the primacy of the economic, social and material "choice environments" which make some choices easier, more normal, and more affordable than others' (5, p. 31). CAST further suggests that while private businesses can implement downstream and some midstream interventions, only governments can incentivise or enable the conditions required for upstream interventions (3).

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Few organisations beyond the United Kingdom have published research or formal guidance on this topic. Given the UK's early and sustained leadership in integrating behavioural science into public policy, it is likely to remain at the forefront of this discourse. We may see particular attention paid to political support for more complex intervention types and measurement of the effectiveness of upstream interventions in the future. Interventions targeting systems-level change may continue to encounter substantial barriers due to a lack of political will and the need for strong cross-sectoral coordination.

3.3 INTERVENTION DESIGN

Debates around behavioural interventions have increasingly focused not only on where they are placed in the proverbial stream but also on their design. Nudges, for example, have been the subject of both widespread use and sustained criticism (3, 22). Defined as choice architecture that alters behaviour without restricting options, nudges are frequently presented as low-cost, scalable tools to public policymakers. A common criticism is that the effect sizes of nudges are too small to generate meaningful change and that they risk diverting attention from systemic interventions, both of which are essential for tackling complex social issues like climate change (22). As stated previously, evidence also suggests that nudges fail to generate durable change, with behaviour reverting to its original state once the intervention is removed (3).

Despite criticisms, the BIT argues that there is still a role for nudges within downstream and midstream approaches. They highlight that everyday environments are often characterised by 'small frictions' that hinder pro-environmental choices (5). For example, green defaults in the energy and food sectors have proven particularly effective. BIT reported a tenfold increase in green energy uptake with high consumer satisfaction as well as a 45% reduction in food waste in hotel canteens when smaller portions were set as the default (5).

CAST similarly identifies nudges as potentially effective in specific contexts, particularly in shaping food consumption (3). Making vegetarian and plant-based foods more visible has been one of the most successful ways to reduce meat consumption. Similarly, the introduction of mandatory vegetarian days in canteens increased the consumption of plant-based meals even on days when meat was available. Still, these results are context-specific and therefore provide mixed results. In supermarkets in the UK, for instance, positioning plant-based products in the meat aisles did not diminish meat sales (3).

Several institutions, therefore, suggest that the most effective interventions are those that combine individual-level techniques, such as nudges or social norms, with broader structural and cultural reforms (1, 3, 5). This bundling approach enhances positive drivers while reducing barriers to sustainable behaviour. Tools such as the COM-B framework and the Behaviour Change Wheel could provide practical guidance for designing integrated interventions that simultaneously target upstream and downstream effects, but further work is needed to assess how these frameworks work within climate policy at scale (3). Looking ahead, we may see an even greater shift towards bundled rather than isolated interventions. However, as this is likely to increase the complexity of public policy proposals, further research is needed to understand how this may affect public comprehension and political support.

It is also important to note the debate on intervention design extends beyond placement and function to a more fundamental question about the scope and effectiveness of behavioural public policy itself in meaningfully tackling climate change. Chater and Loewenstein best articulate this debate in their now famous criticism of the field's focus on demand-side interventions (individual choice) at the expense of supply-side regulation (industry constraints) (22). They go on to say behavioural science has been co-opted as a form of inaction, suggesting that individual behaviour change has become a substitute for system-wide regulation on manufacturers and producers. While this article does not take a position on this debate, it represents a significant critique all behavioural units must consider and answer for themselves.

3.4 EXPERT COLLABORATION

Expert collaboration between policymakers and academics is recognised as essential for the practical application of behavioural science in public policy (1, 20). Academic expertise contributes theoretical rigour, methodological depth, and evidence-based insights to policy design. In contrast, policy teams provide practical context and implementation experience that advance understanding of behaviour change in practice.

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Many behavioural units formally integrate academic advice into their activities. Beyond employing multidisciplinary teams, units frequently collaborate directly with universities and research institutes on specific projects. For example, the UN Behavioural Science Group supports academic fellowships and convenes panels to facilitate the exchange of cutting-edge research (20). Similarly, BIT has its work reviewed by a scientific panel, drawing directly on academic expertise.

Despite these foundations, a research–policy gap remains. Behavioural units, academics, and policymakers often still operate in silos, with limited mutual awareness of each other's projects, priorities, and approaches. Globally, knowledge exchange tends to occur in an ad hoc rather than a systematic manner, resulting in uneven levels of expertise across countries and institutions. The European Commission has argued that stronger ties would not only expand the repertoire of tools available to practitioners but also enable more effective translation of academic findings into relevant policy insights (23). Similarly, Naru's 2024 global study found that practitioners themselves identified 'bridging the gap between research and policy' as the third most cited challenge facing behavioural units (1). Specifically, behavioural scientists expressed difficulty in convincing policymakers of the need for more rigorous intervention testing, such as randomised controlled trials and mixed methods, to implement more effective solutions.

Explicit discussion of collaboration between academics and policymakers in sustainability and climate change projects appears limited in the sources examined. However, given the speed at which public policy priorities evolve and the continuous development of climate science, such collaboration will likely become necessary, if not vital, in the coming decade. But achieving this will require greater transparency in the sharing of findings and explicit recognition of the differing realities and priorities faced by academics and policymakers. If left unaddressed, this may impede much-needed collaboration in this space.

4. SUCCESS FACTORS FOR BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE UNITS

There is a wide range of guidance on the structure of behavioural units. Indeed, throughout the last decade, we saw the publication of OECD's six APPLES lessons and the EU's PRECIS framework (9). More recently, the OECD has identified six trends driving the green transition (4) while Naru's qualitative study of behavioural public policy bodies summarised advice from current units (1). Drawing on these frameworks and qualitative responses from behaviour units, we propose four principles for engaging in climate change projects that could significantly contribute to their success: defined, embedded, connected, and multi-stakeholder.

DEFINED

To address the gap between policymakers and researchers, the definition and value of behavioural science should be made clear to the overarching organisation. Further, each unit should define for their specific organisation what behavioural science means, the value of behavioural insights, and the critical role behaviour change plays in climate change mitigation and adaptation. This may help elevate the role of behavioural science across the entirety of the public policy cycle. This tenet may also be applied to the final project stage, in which project outcomes are consistently and transparently disclosed and published (7).

EMBEDDED

To ensure the long-term viability of the unit, behavioural science teams should aim to be embedded within the government at senior levels and with a diversified ecosystem of support. The European Union has summarised these embedded principles as the PRECIS model: engagement from senior politicians and long-term *political support*; adequate team *resources* to support project load; multidisciplinary *expertise*, including external advisory support; policy *coverage*, or the breadth of application to a specific policy field; *integration* within the government; and the *structure* of the unit to centralise experts in proximity to policy departments lead to effective, embedded teams (7). The OECD suggests similar guidance in the six APPLES framework, in which *Administration* stands for a clear mandate, *Politics* for high-level political backing, *People* for multidisciplinary teams, *Location* for proximity to decision-makers, *Experimentation* for a test-learn-adapt mindset, and finally *Scholarship* for rigorous, peer-reviewed work (9). Furthering this point, Naru's survey of behavioural units suggests developing an ecosystem of support, ensuring teams are not dependent on a single senior-level champion

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(1). Being 'embedded' may be a critical foundation for designing and implementing upstream and midstream behaviour change projects that target long-term, systemic change.

CONNECTED

To boost effective implementation, behavioural science should be integrated into the point of delivery from the outset. A new study of behavioural units in the UK and the Netherlands reports that units meet research standards but struggle to demonstrate applied value to policymakers (13). To combat this, they suggest closer collaboration between implementation teams and behavioural units throughout a climate change project, as well as the adoption of more systemic implementation frameworks (13). This may also help unify researchers and public policymakers at the onset of a project, focusing explicitly on implementation and impact from the beginning, and aligning on delivery capabilities.

MULTI-STAKEHOLDER

To expand beyond top-down governance targeting individual-level behavioural change, behavioural units should aim to engage stakeholders across society. Projects should therefore be diversified to reach myriad audiences beyond consumers and citizens to include business people, farmers, producers, providers, and even politicians themselves. Audience diversification not only broadens impact but also reflects the reality that climate mitigation and adaptation require behaviour changes across multiple levels of society and governance. Furthermore, projects should aim to broaden their input by engaging the public at the earliest stages of policy planning and design, ensuring fair, effective, and beneficial outcomes for all (3). Public buy-in at earlier stages may also reduce reactance and potential public backlash from the implementation.

5. BROADER CONSIDERATIONS

While the success factors outlined above provide practical guidance on how behavioural units can be structured and operated to support their effectiveness, they do not resolve the deeper ethical and political questions that accompany climate governance. Even the most well-defined, embedded, connected, and multi-stakeholder-focused units must contend with the ethics of and normative debates around the proper role of governments in shaping behaviour, the design of climate policy, and the involvement of other organisations in governance.

How should we design behaviourally informed policies that guide stakeholders towards sustainable choices without undermining autonomy or trust? This is the central dilemma surrounding the role of governments in climate action. Proudfoot and Kay argue 'people often feel hostile toward regulations that limit their behaviour and develop a heightened desire for whatever has been restricted' (24, p. 261). Citizens may resist change when they feel personal freedoms are being constrained, even subtly. Where trust in government is fragile or misinformation is prevalent, behavioural interventions specific to climate policy may face heightened scrutiny. This tension may be felt particularly acutely in countries where climate change is a politically contested issue, such as the United States. Proudfoot and Kay find that presenting policy changes as preserving rather than threatening existing values and ways of life can meaningfully reduce reactance (24). Behavioural units may need to strategise with public policy experts on public appetite for climate-specific behavioural interventions and build an approach that secures trust with citizens.

Multilevel governance deliberations are one approach that may minimise reactance and increase institutional legitimacy. Even while the effectiveness of democratic processes in advancing climate legislation is being questioned, the IPCC remains steadfast that civic participation and deliberation remain central to addressing climate change (2). Lindskog and Elander suggest democratic governments are unlikely to mitigate and adapt to issues like climate change on their own; rather, change is more likely to be accomplished through a patchwork of institutions alongside formal government structures, including social movements, NGOs, and foundations (25). Thus, more participation and collaboration with citizens may improve community trust, outcomes, and impact. The realities of such an approach in the face of further political division, populism, misinformation, and political gridlock, however, may prove unattainable, perhaps even futile.

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Today, much of the existing literature concentrates on the policies and practices of large Western nations, where behavioural science has become institutionalised through well-resourced and long-standing units embedded within government structures. Smaller, newer units have begun to emerge in developing contexts, particularly within wealthier regions such as the Middle East. Some of this activity appears to result from collaborations between developing economies and established organisations such as the UK's BIT, reflecting a broader pattern of behavioural science expertise being exported from Western to non-Western policy environments (26). Whether this diffusion will develop into a sustained trend or how partnerships between emerging and legacy units in the UK and US could shape the field remains unclear. Further, which countries and contexts may be marginalised as behavioural knowledge continues to be produced and circulated globally also remains to be seen.

6. CONCLUSION

Behavioural science is now a recognised component of public policymaking, yet its contribution to climate action remains limited. This article has shown that behavioural units across governments and international organisations are engaged in a growing range of climate-related initiatives, but their work is constrained by institutional structures, uneven knowledge exchange, and an ongoing emphasis on individual-level interventions. Examining how these units are organised and the challenges they encounter provides insights into both the current and potential boundaries of behavioural approaches to climate policy.

To enhance the contribution of behavioural science to climate mitigation and adaptation, we propose four principles that can guide the development of behavioural units within public institutions. These principles are definition, embeddedness, connectedness, and multi-stakeholder capacity. Together, they underline the importance of clear mandates, integration into policy processes, strong links between research and implementation, and engagement with a wider set of actors across society. Applying behavioural insights across multiple levels of governance, including upstream regulatory and infrastructural interventions, will be essential if behavioural science is to support the forms of collective change needed for a sustainable transition.

As behavioural approaches become more prominent in climate governance, ethical and political considerations will remain central. Governments will need to support low-carbon choices while maintaining public trust, avoiding perceptions of manipulation, and ensuring that responsibility for behavioural change is distributed fairly. Inclusive and deliberative processes may help address divergent views on responsibility and legitimacy, particularly where climate action is politically contested. Attending to these broader issues can help behavioural units and policymakers apply behavioural insights in ways that are both effective and consistent with democratic values.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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