

Advisory report

Engage with behaviour change!

Making sustainable and adaptation
behaviour easy and obvious



WKR.

Summary

Many Dutch people consider climate change to be important and are willing to act on it. However, the physical and social context oftentimes inhibits sustainable or climate-adaptation choices, for example, because choices are not affordable or because people are tempted to make choices that are unsustainable or increase climate risks.

The context can be changed in many ways to enable sustainable and adaptation behaviour. Sustainable behaviour reflects choices and behaviours that reduce greenhouse gas emissions, such as purchasing a heat pump, buying second-hand items, or traveling by train rather than by car. Adaptation behaviour involves choices and behaviours that reduce risks from climate change, such as installing sunshades, placing sandbags, or drinking enough during hot periods. The national government can enable citizens to engage in these behaviours through behavioural policy, which requires different combinations of policy instruments than those currently used.

Many behavioural policies are halted due to resistance rooted in ideological convictions and vested interests. Although behavioural policy can make people more resilient to climate change and increase their freedom of choice, enabling them to engage in behaviours that align with their values (such as valuing the environment or their health), it is often argued that behavioural policy limits individuals' freedom of choice. Behavioural policy on certain topics is therefore almost non negotiable for some. Yet, at the same time, the Dutch government allows commercial parties to continuously influence people's behaviour, for example through advertisements. Vested interests have a stake in unsustainable consumption and the use of fossil fuels. Such interests have a strong voice in the public debate and frequently interact with politics and the government. This affects policy decisions.

Behavioural policy has great potential. The Dutch people expect the government to take measures to limit climate change. They support climate policy to a greater extent than mostly assumed, even when it directly affects them, as long as policies are fair, which implies that costs and benefits are distributed fairly. Many citizens express concerns because they believe the government listens too much to powerful parties and does not take the interests of ordinary citizens into account. People find it important that major emitters are also targeted ('the polluter pays'), while they think this is currently not the case. Many Dutch people believe that low-income groups are disproportionately affected by climate policy in general and behavioural policy in particular. This undermines public support for climate policy, including behavioural policy.

More sustainable and adaptation behaviour is urgently needed so that Dutch people can continue to ensure a healthy, safe, and liveable country, now and in the future. If Dutch people acted more sustainably, greenhouse gas emissions could be significantly reduced. With a limited number of behaviour changes, 17 megatons of CO₂ can be saved. This brings the achievement of the legal climate target for 2030 within closer reach. Additionally, it is critical to make people more resilient against the negative impacts of climate change, such as higher temperatures and extreme weather, because the government cannot reduce or remove all risks. Well-chosen behavioural policy would result in more affordable and fair climate policy and would have many other positive effects on nature and public health, among other things.

But the Dutch national government is not exploiting the potential of behavioural policy. To seize the potential of behaviour change, more effective and structural behavioural policy is needed. In this advisory report, the Netherlands Scientific Climate Council recommends how policy can be more effective in changing behaviour and how behavioural policy can structurally play a larger role.

Recommendations for more effective behavioural policy

Behavioural policy is more effective when it addresses key antecedents of choices and behaviour. As most choices and behaviour are influenced by multiple factors, a mix of policy instruments and measures is needed. Ideally, positive as well as negative incentives are implemented, while counterproductive incentives are removed. Hence, the following three recommendations, in conjunction, will make behavioural policy more effective.

1. Create a context in which sustainable and adaptation behaviour is easy, affordable, attractive, and the norm, via spatial policy, subsidies, choice architecture, and information provision.
2. Implement policy that discourages behaviours that increase climate risks, including spatial policy, pricing instruments, laws and regulation, and information provision.
3. Remove counterproductive incentives that promote behaviours that contributes to climate risks, such as fossil subsidies, and advertisements and offers aimed at promoting the consumption of meat, dairy, gasoline cars, and air travel, among other things.

Recommendations for more structural behavioural policy

Behavioural policy is not yet being implemented structurally because of how interactions between society, markets, and the public sector are currently organized. Present barriers can be removed in the following three ways.

4. Make the influence of vested interests more transparent and limit their influence. Improve the involvement of societal organizations and citizens in

policy making.

5. Ensure that policy targeting sustainable and adaptation behaviour is fair, for example by (higher) pricing for above average consumption, progressive taxes, or compensation.
6. Place the potential and necessity of structural behavioural policy on the agenda at the directorate level within the government. Increase behavioural knowledge and capacity within the government in three ways: basic knowledge among all file holders, behavioural experts per department, and an expert centre across departments.

It is now time to engage with behaviour change. Implementing these six recommendations does not always require additional scientific research. Policy makers can make use of a rich knowledge base that is already available, and learn by doing by carefully evaluating the effects of behavioural policy and adapt the policy when appropriate. In this advisory report, we illustrate this with three examples: traveling short distances more often by bike or on foot instead of by car, eating more sustainably, and greening the garden.

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