The Behavioral Professional

IMPROVING DECISION-MAKING AND PERFORMANCE IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

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Contents

Over the past decade, governments, multilateral organizations and think tanks have been increasingly using behavioral science as an additional tool to understand and tackle complex policy challenges in several sectors. Yet despite this increase in the use of behavioral science for policy design, little attention has been given so far to those individuals responsible for designing and implementing public policies and programs: policy professionals.

Civil servants, like every human being, and against their best intentions, experience biases in information processing and are influenced by their mindsets as well as institutional and group contexts in multiple ways. This affects their decision-making, performance and, consequently, program design, implementation, and public services delivery. With the public sector responsible for 16 percent of total global employment, 30 percent of wage employment, and 38 percent of formal sector wage employment, the stakes could not be higher.[1]

Civil servants, like every human being, and against their best intentions, experience biases in information processing and are influenced by their mindsets as well as institutional and group contexts in multiple ways.

There are myriad ways in which high level decision makers all the way down to frontline staff (social welfare workers, teachers, nurses, doctors, etc.) can affect access, quality and/or effectiveness of service delivery to beneficiaries. For example, recent work by the Mind, Behavior, and Development Unit (eMBeD) and the World Bank Health, Nutrition, and Population Global Practice in a large-scale national study in the Philippines revealed differences in beliefs among frontline health and nutrition workers regarding the root causes of stunting. It showed that those who agreed with views of child stunting being due to genetic and racial factors (vs. nutrition and prenatal care) were less likely to work in facilities that provided better maternal and child nutrition services.

Similarly, looking at the current challenges around the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out, health workers' own mindsets and beliefs on vaccine efficacy and safety are likely to affect their motivation as well as communication to beneficiaries. This is particularly critical for vaccine take-up given recent findings from vaccine hesitancy surveys that suggest that individuals see health sector workers as the most credible and trustworthy source of information on vaccine safety and efficacy.

This note aims to achieve three objectives. First, it highlights recent examples building on work done by the eMBeD team and the World Bank at large on how behavioral bottlenecks can hinder key development goals, from ensuring inclusive and equitable education for all (SDG4) to ensuring good health and well-being (SDG3), among others. Second, the note proposes a behavioral framework highlighting the individual, group and institutional contexts that affect policy professionals. Finally, it showcases the relevance of the behavioral approach to a broad range of areas – including public service design, corruption and accountability, service design, access and delivery, civil servants' performance – by pinpointing common bottlenecks faced, and potential solutions to overcome them.

1. Worldwide Bureaucracy Indicators (WWBI); Apolitical (2019)

01.

The behavioral professional in practice.
Looking at the mirror.

Policy professionals are not immune to behavioral biases and are influenced by their social environments and their mindsets. This includes not only policymakers and civil servants working on implementation (e.g. Ministry of Education staff, procurement agency staff), but also frontline staff interacting directly with beneficiaries (e.g. nurses, teachers, social workers) who play a critical role in service delivery.

Remarkably, a meta-analysis from nearly 500 studies by Durlak and DuPre (2008) revealed that the impact of programs or projects that are carefully implemented can be two to three times higher than programs that are not carefully implemented or have serious implementation problems. Whether a program is well implemented depends on frontline staff skill proficiency, but, as highlighted by the meta-analysis, also on a number of behavioral aspects. This includes policy professionals' mindsets, their perceptions about the need for, and potential benefits of a given program, confidence in their ability to deliver, and sense of self-efficacy (Abry et al, 2013; Durlak & DuPre, 2008).

Can these insights apply to policy professionals in development settings and impact their work? We highlight recent examples from work by eMBeD and other teams at the World Bank, in the context of different SDGs goals, which showcases how policy professionals' behavioral biases, social environments, and mindsets can affect the achievement of development outcomes. We also illustrate through some of these examples how adopting a behavioral lens can complement existing solutions to support SDGs goals by improving program design and implementation through tackling policy professionals' behavioral biases, leveraging social dimensions, or re-designing processes.

SDGs 1 and 8

Improving Repayment of Microcredit Loans

In Bangladesh, eMBeD and the Social Protection Global Practice applied small behaviorally-informed changes to improve service delivery, by re-designing an existing process of microcredit loans repayments. Changes included simplifying the payment receipt form to minimize social workers' effort, as well as using a feedback mechanism to make late payment by beneficiaries of the rural microcredit program salient.

Preliminary results from two small pilot experiments suggest that these changes led to time savings (totaling seven hours each month) and a decrease in late payments (which also translates into additional cost and time savings, due to the need for fewer follow-up visits by social workers). This work is part of a World Bank project to improve the transparency and efficiency of programs – rural microcredit and two major cash transfer programs – for vulnerable populations by modernizing social workers' service delivery.

HEALTH WORKER BELIEFS AFFECT EFFORT AND ULTIMATELY QUALITY OF SERVICE PROVISION

SDG 2

Improving Effectiveness of Nutrition Policies

eMBeD and the Health, Nutrition, and Population Global Practice recently carried out a large-scale national study on stunting (an important marker of child undernutrition) in the Philippines. A mixed-method approach was used to explore beliefs and attitudes about stunting among frontline health and nutrition workers, local public officials, and caregivers, as well as how this affected the practices adopted by frontliners when providing care services.

This included a listing and grouping exercise of root causes of stunting, as well as in-depth interviews and focus groups. A large-scale quantitative survey among frontline workers in 10 regions was then carried out to understand the importance given to the different beliefs that emerged during the initial exploratory work.

Findings revealed that most workers' knowledge and beliefs were consistent with conventional practices (i.e. emphasis on nutrition and prenatal care). However, a minority of workers also agreed with views of child stunting being due to genetic and racial factors, alongside faith- and fate-based factors. More importantly, these workers were less likely to work in facilities that provided better maternal and child nutrition services, suggesting that child outcomes and health workers beliefs are highly correlated (Sen et al., 2020).

UNCONSCIOUS BIASES CAN REDUCE PROGRAM/ SERVICE TAKE-UP

SDG 3

Reducing Maternal and Neo-natal Mortality Rates

In Haiti, low rates of prenatal and postnatal care, and institutional births, contribute to high levels of maternal and neo-natal mortality rates (the highest in the Latin America and Caribbean region). Research by eMBeD and the Health, Nutrition, and Population Global Practice revealed that pregnant women experience barriers for seeking and receiving prenatal care, including some related to unconscious biases from health workers.

There are several ways in which frontline staff can affect access, quality and/or effectiveness of service delivery to beneficiaries. Specifically, the research carried out showed that pregnant women fear being judged negatively by nurses, as they are asked many questions at registration, including some on their sexual habits; this stereotype threat can prevent them from seeking care. Likewise, they face barriers that discourage them from delivering at an institution, such as lack of trust in medical staff due to rumors about medical staff negligence circulating around the community. Notably, while in other low-income countries 70 percent of births take place in a health facility, less than 40 percent do in Haiti.

In another study with frontline health staff, Banerjee et al. (2008) showed that while a monitoring and financial penalties program was highly successful in increasing attendance rates of nurses in Indian public health facilities in the first six months, the program eventually became ineffective. This was due to actions by the local health administration staff who was responsible for enforcement of penalties (i.e. staff allowed nurses to claim an increasing number of “excused” absences, possibly as a way to deal with pressures from nurses while meeting obligations towards their superiors in terms of program implementation).

TEACHER BELIEFS AFFECT THEIR PRACTICES AND ULTIMATELY STUDENTS' LEARNING

SDG 4

Ensuring Inclusive and Equitable Education for All

Since teachers' instructional practices and unconscious preferences can hinder students' gains and efforts, eMBeD is working with teachers in various settings to understand their own behavior in the classroom, identify potential biases and propose ways to overcome these. For example, in North Macedonia, eMBeD, together with the Social Protection and Jobs and Education Global Practices tested different interventions to generate more inclusive school environments and tackle teachers' biases by promoting socio-emotional skills in the classroom.

A first intervention focused on fostering grit and reducing stereotype threat. Implemented nationally across all schools teaching in Macedonian and Albanian language, it targeted 6th and 7th grade students and their teachers. Promising results were observed from the intervention that trained teachers and where teachers delivered socio-emotional skills lessons to the students. Roma students in particular showed positive impacts on socio-emotional skills and on grade point averages equivalent to three weeks of school. A second intervention, adding a mentorship model where 7th and 8th grade students mentored 4th grade students in the great er Skopje area showed promising impacts among girls and increased awareness by teachers of the value of socio-emotional skills for learning. A third intervention (underway as of printing) is focusing on primary school teachers to more directly tackle teacher's classroom practices that can lead to unintentional discrimination of minority students.

In Turkish schools, eMBeD is using Virtual Reality (VR) to improve empathy and overall attitudes of teachers towards Syrian students through perspective-changing and contact theory. eMBeD is testing the effectiveness of a VR interventions in promoting empathetic teachers' attitudes and behaviors toward different social groups (particularly Syrian students under Temporary Protection). In a first phase, exploratory fieldwork was carried out to examine empathy drivers of teachers and identify relevant content and format for the VR intervention. This was done through qualitative research with main actors, including teachers and students (Turkish and Syrian), but also principals and students' families. Phase 2, will comprise an evaluation of the effectiveness of the VR intervention, in which contact and perspective-taking will be used to allow teachers to experience and interact with Syrian students (the outgroup), or even become one. VR content focuses on increasing teachers' motivation to use belonging techniques and equipping them with hands-on knowledge for doing so.

DECISION MAKERS' NORMS, RECOGNITION, AND THEIR EFFECT ON PERFORMANCE

SDG 16

Building Effective and Accountable Institutions

In Romania, a behavioral diagnostic by eMBeD and the Governance Global Practice identified psychological barriers for managers and other civil servants that hinder performance management. In the Romanian Civil Service, it was observed that the performance evaluation system was not being implemented as originally intended and was failing to effectively promote individual civil servant motivation and performance.

To understand beliefs, motivations, and behaviors regarding performance appraisal systems, the project included open-ended and guided focus group discussions with civil servants as well as in-depth interviews and vignettes with managers in seven different public organizations in Romania.[2] The analysis revealed several bottlenecks. For example, most staff receive high ratings in annual assessments - the norm due to a risk of litigation and overall culture. The diagnostic found that meaningful ratings were hardly sought among managers, who preferred to maintain the status quo. This adversely affected motivation, especially of better performing civil servants. Building on the evidence gathered and insights from behavioral science, eMBeD devised a set of actionable solutions that could be tested to improve motivation and engagement of employees. For instance, having mid-term check-in with coaching of (technical) managers (e.g. on giving feedback, using behaviorally informed motivational tools such as social recognition and appreciation).

In Nigeria, although record keeping in health facilities is an important task (e.g. it allows the government to track cash flows), it was perceived as a mundane task by workers who lacked the motivation to complete their tasks. eMBeD tested the effectiveness of a social recognition intervention to improve record keeping by civil servant in health facilities in two Nigerian states.

An inexpensive four-week social recognition intervention – weekly "Certificate of Excellence" showing performance through a number of "stars" displayed prominently within the facility, coupled with distinction for the best performing facility and all staff members in a special ceremony with the Permanent Secretary of Health at the end – increased performance in one of the two states (Gauri et al., 2019).[3]

2. Vignettes are short stories that present circumstances similar to what respondents might face and asks them about the choice that the main character in the story would make. This response is taken to be indicative of the choice that the respondents would make themselves.

3. Differences across states were not accounted by observable characteristics at the facility level, but closer examination of social contexts and institutional structures would be required to examine why findings didn't generalize.

SUNK COST BIAS AND INERTIA AFFECT BUDGET PREPARATION

SDG 16

Improving Resource Allocation

The final example shows how policy professionals biases can affect program management and investment, or more specifically, how fund allocation decisions can be impacted by sunk cost bias (percentage of budget already spent).

When development professionals were presented with a decision on whether to continue committing funds to an underperforming program that had been active for four years, all things being equal, they were significantly more likely to do so in a scenario where 70% ($350 million) of the funds had been spent vs. when only 30% ($150 million) of the funds had been spent (World Bank, 2015). This example shows that to reduce budget inertia – a typical public financial management problem - sunk-cost bias of budget officials needs to be addressed.

02.

Connecting the dots. The three contexts of behavioral professionals.

Policy professionals do not behave in vacuum; their decision-making process is influenced by three interdependent contexts: institutional, individual and group (Figure 1).[4]

The **institutional context** refers to how systems are set in each setting and organization. It pertains specifically to how rules and processes are designed, implemented, and monitored.

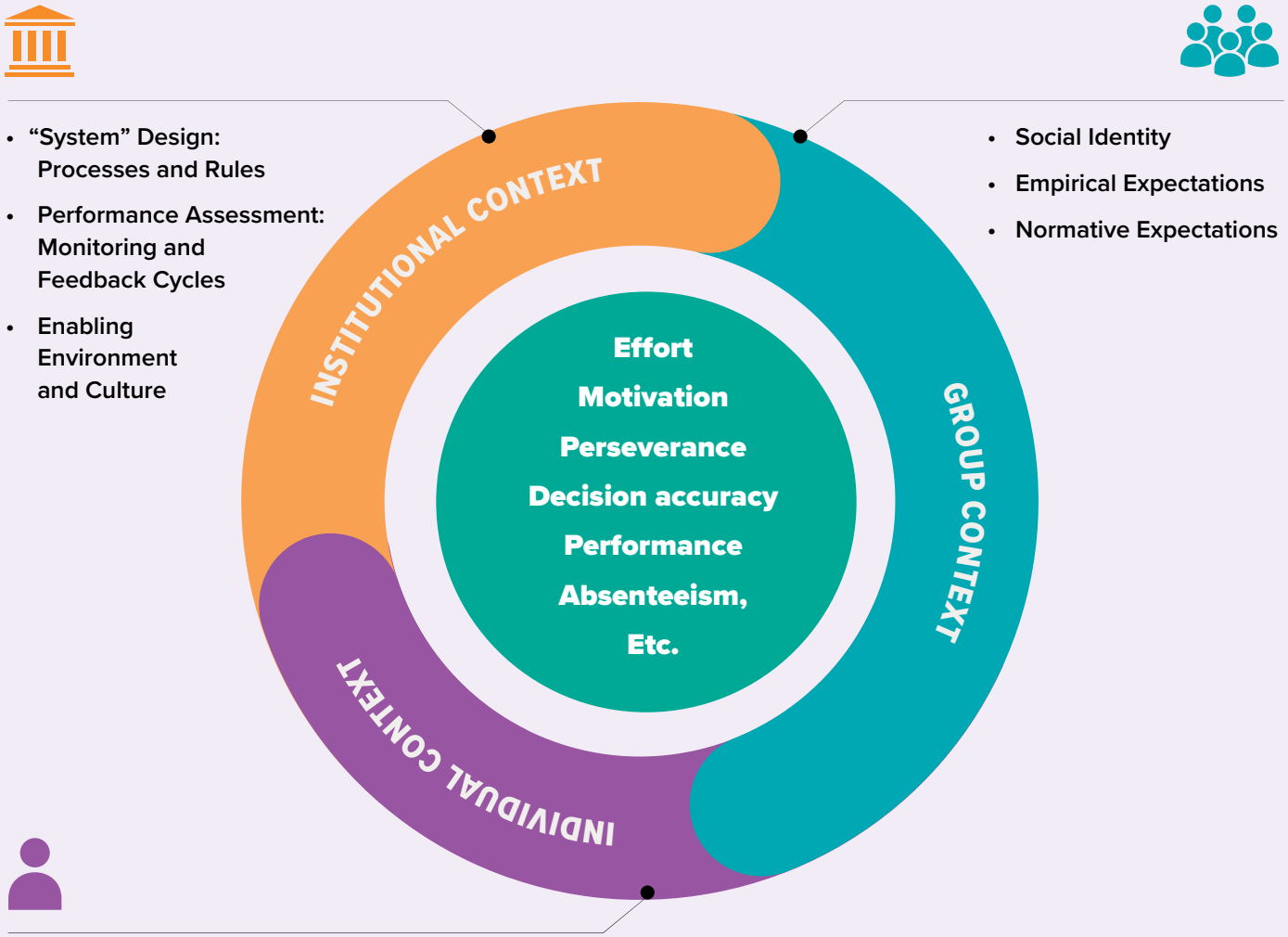
The **group context** refers to the role of social dimensions, such as the individual's social identity, group identity, and social norms or rules and standards regarding behaviors in a society.

The **individual context** encompasses dimensions pertaining to one's motivation to perform, interpretation of information (data, others or situations) and abilities. It covers multiple aspects, such as the role of monetary and non-monetary rewards, beliefs about how the world works, cognitive biases, or non-cognitive or soft skills, among others.

These three contexts are interdependent. For instance, beliefs, motivation, and social identities can influence behavior towards beneficiaries. Likewise, organizational culture and bureaucratic norms can help shape decisions and actions of civil servants. Within each of these contexts, several factors are at play, as detailed in Annex 1.

4. The proposed framework builds on literature on behavioral science, public administration and service delivery, as well as on existing frameworks relevant for the context at hand. These include the Mind, Society, and Behavior Framework on how individuals make decisions (i.e. people think automatically, think socially, and think with mental models) (World Bank, 2015) and the Means, Motives and Opportunity Framework on community health worker performance (John et al, 2019).

FIGURE 1:
THE BEHAVIORAL POLICY PROFESSIONAL'S CONTEXTS



ONE'S MOTIVATION

- Goals and Career Aspirations
- Monetary and Non-Monetary Incentives
- (Perceived) Relevance of Work
- Civic-Mindedness

ONE'S INTERPRETATION

- Mental Models and Beliefs
- Cognitive Biases
- Bandwidth

ONE'S ABILITY

- Knowledge
- Non-cognitive skills
- Technical skills

03.

From behavioral insights to solutions.

42 Solutions

Table 1 below presents a theory of change of sort, summarizing selected examples of relevant policy areas and moments of the policy cycle that can, and typically are, influenced by biases (see also Annex 2 for a description of typical biases among policy professionals) **and other behavioral barriers.**

It then outlines some possible solutions. The examples come from a range of policy areas including budget and investment planning, corruption and accountability, policy and program design, access to services, and civil servants' performance. Potential solutions – at the individual, group and institutional levels[5] – are also presented that have been shown to influence similar behaviors in other contexts and that could be applied to improve the decision-making, implementation and service delivery of policies and programs.

5. To illustrate, systems can for example be modified using principles of choice architecture, to mitigate errors of reasoning and biases that can have direct impacts on program outcomes (addressing the institutional context); social recognition and appreciation can be used to increase motivation and bureaucratic performance (addressing the individual context); role models or interaction with social referents, as well as identity-labelling interventions, can be used to change norms (addressing the group context).

TABLE 1. (1/4)

COMMON BARRIERS AFFECTING THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

COMMON BIASES / BEHAVIORAL BARRIERS	AFFECTING...	POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS ACROSS THE THREE CONTEXTS...	TO IMPROVE...
Confirmation bias, overconfidence, "better than the average" effect, blind spot bias, illusion of similarity, group reinforcement	How policy proposals and programs are discussed; how evidence is presented; how opposing or minority views are expressed and considered	Encourage cognitive strategies to evaluate evidence (e.g. "consider the opposite," "taking an outsider view")	Policy and program design
		Prime individuals to "think critically"	
		Use debiasing checklists and prompt their application	
		Leverage technology to debias using active and personalized learning and repeated practice	
		Gather viewpoints anonymously in advance to enable divergent views (e.g. anonymous voting)	
		Have leaders in the organization publicly promote divergent thought	
Misperceived level of corruption among peers, reciprocity, social preferences, system of incentives, moral costs	Factors that may contribute to corruption in the form of bribery or other rent-seeking behavior that could undermine policy implementation	Communicate descriptive norms to correct misperceptions, or conveyed positive dynamic trends (reduction in corruption level)	Allocation of resources and public goods provision
		Increase or make the moral costs more salient (e.g. by decreasing the ambiguity in evaluation standards)	
		Increase accountability to beneficiaries and observability (e.g. reduce frictions for access to information and exercising voice)	
		Promote accountability and transparency to increase trust (e.g. using community leaders to aid in targeting, increasing flow of information to beneficiaries)	
		Create anonymous reporting mechanisms; ensure security of staff reporting corruption and rent-seeking behavior	
		Increase attention to standards for honesty through reminders (e.g. sign moral/accuracy-confirming statement upfront)	
		Create conflict of interest forms to be filled and confirmed regularly	
		Exposure to positive role models	

TABLE 1. (2/4)

COMMON BARRIERS AFFECTING THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

COMMON BIASES / BEHAVIORAL BARRIERS	AFFECTING...	POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS ACROSS THE THREE CONTEXTS...	TO IMPROVE...
Formal and informal rules, social norms, moral licensing, mental models, trust	Barriers to effective performance management and procedures which can impact employee motivation and engagement	Encourage employee intrinsic motivation (e.g. gratitude expressions, publicly acknowledging good work behavior; organizational awards for outstanding performance)	Performance management
		Decrease costs for providing feedback (e.g., timely prompts, defaults, clear and transparent rules)	
		Provide support to actions by managers (e.g. coaching on giving feedback; "cheat sheet" with tips and tools to engage and motivate staff); mentorship programs	
		Create department and individual-level goals and promote a results-oriented mindset among staff (away from a focus on process)	
		Recognize improvements in performance towards a goal/leverage goal gradient effect	
Optimism bias, planning fallacy, sunk cost bias, normalcy bias, status quo bias	How project decisions and implementation can be objectively monitored; openness to adapt to new processes	'Premortems' to imagine project failure and root causes	Program and project management and investment planning
		Encourage looking to similar project outside of own context or taking an outsider view to increase objectivity	
		Prompt estimates according to different scenarios to encourages thinking about a larger number of possibilities	
		Build in breakpoints to revisit assumptions and plans	
		Establish mechanisms for (more frequent) feedback	

TABLE 1. (3/4)

COMMON BARRIERS AFFECTING THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

COMMON BIASES / BEHAVIORAL BARRIERS	AFFECTING...	POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS ACROSS THE THREE CONTEXTS...	TO IMPROVE...
Preferences and beliefs, perceived value of the work, social norms, incentives, accountability	How frontline staff understand and believe in the objective of the work; perceived need for service; motivation and job satisfaction	Leaders publicly promote value of service providers work	Service delivery quality and fidelity of program implementation
		Soft skills training (e.g. goal setting, grit, belonging) to improve commitment, and public service delivery	
		Use non-monetary incentives (e.g. social recognition, gratitude expression) to improve motivation/performance	
		Recognize improvements in performance towards a goal	
		Increase accountability to beneficiaries and observability (e.g. improve access information and exercising voice)	
		Use social comparison nudges to prompt individuals to complete specific tasks or adhere to a target behavior	
Preferences and beliefs, racial and ethnic biases and stereotypes related to out-group beneficiaries	The quality of interaction between social workers and beneficiaries	Leverage technology to debias using active and personalized learning and repeated practice	Service delivery quality and access
		Communicate descriptive norms to correct misperceptions	
		Promote accountability and transparency (e.g. using community leaders to aid in targeting, increasing flow of information to beneficiaries)	
		Encourage interactions with other service providers that could be leveraged as role models	
		Implement strategies which facilitate and improve objective assessment (e.g. blinding of gender or ethnicity of applicants from case files)	
		Use role models to signal an appropriate behavior one is trying to promote	
		Encourage perspective-taking	

TABLE 1. (4/4)

COMMON BARRIERS AFFECTING THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

COMMON BIASES / BEHAVIORAL BARRIERS	AFFECTING...	POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS ACROSS THE THREE CONTEXTS...	TO IMPROVE...
Information costs, mental bandwidth, limited attention, perceived cost, self-efficacy	How well one can understand and interpret information about the program rules or beneficiary eligibility; how compliance with instructions/rules is perceived (easy, difficult); existence of unnecessary steps or actions required	Reduce cost of learning the actions to follow to deliver the program (e.g. simplify information, make information more direct, salient, visual, etc.)	Service delivery quality and fidelity of program implementation
		Reduce friction costs to adhere to steps in program implementation	
		Simplify forms and procedures or use checklists	
		Remove unnecessary information updates, documentation, calculations	
		Send timely reminders to prompt action	

(RE)TRAINING BEHAVIORALLY

Addressing Cognitive and Motivational Competencies

Potential entry points for capacity building training and service delivery improvements include debiasing, with focus on biased beliefs regarding context or beneficiaries or biases affecting data interpretation. The evidence generally suggests that informing people of biases is not enough. Individuals still need to be able to recognize situations where biases may be at play as well as be motivated and able to effectively use relevant strategies (Chang et al, 2016; Neilens et al, 2009; Soll et al, 2014; Hallsworth et al, 2018). Training can focus on teaching people appropriate rules and principles and changing the individual's cognitive strategies (Soll et al, 2014; Larrick, 2004). This holds similarities to the concept of "boosts", which aim to foster the individual's cognitive and/or motivational competences to promote behavioral change and require some level of engagement (Hertwig & Grüne-Yanoff, 2017). For instance, a recent survey experiment with policy professionals showed that deliberation in pairs can reduce confirmation bias (Banuri et al, 2019; see also Vivalt and Coville, 2019).

What type of training format could help policy professionals? Recent evidence suggests that while unconscious (or implicit) bias training is effective at increasing awareness, its impact in behavior in the workplace, relating to equality, diversity and inclusion, is limited (Alleyne, 2020; Atewologun, Cornish & Tresh, 2018). In line with this, a recent randomized evaluation testing the effectiveness of a one-off online diversity training in a global organization found some positive effects on attitudes, but mostly null effects on employee behavioral change (Chang et al., 2019). There is, however, suggestive evidence that aspects such as targeted and repeated practice, personalized and timely feedback, and domain-specific training may increase efficacy of debiasing training (Chang et al, 2016; Soll et al, 2014). Importantly, technology offers several possibilities to implement these strategies. First, recent studies showed that a one-shot debiasing training intervention, implemented through a "serious game" making use of repetition, personalization and feedback led to positive effects both immediately and up to three months from training (Morewedge et al, 2015; Sellier et al, 2019).

Second, VR technology can be used for immersive training, while simulating real life conditions and affording opportunities for repeated practice. Recent evidence suggests that VR training holds promise as a mechanism to develop technical, practical, and socio-emotional skills in students (Angel-Urdinola, Castillo-Castro, & Hoyos, 2021). Also, as mentioned above, eMBeD is testing the effectiveness of a VR interventions in promoting empathetic teachers' attitudes and behaviors

towards Syrian students in Turkey.

Third, mobile technology can be leveraged in combination with behavioral strategies to build personalized, sustainable, and scalable behavioral change solutions, while allowing to monitor user's responses and (sustained) engagement.[6] Within a technological able environment, multiple behavioral science tools can be applied either to, for example, motivate users towards a goal, including personalized feedback, reminders for action, actionable tips to make the intended behavior simpler or remove triggers, tools to build resilience such as work around self-efficacy, perceived control or growth mindset, timely and positive reinforcement, peer support and accountability. In line with the available evidence discussed above, careful design – including by building both on behavioral science and learning principles – and testing of training interventions is essential.

6. An area that has seen a considerable number of smartphone application for behavioral change is weight loss, and similar strategies can be tested to promote behavioral change in other areas. For instance, recent research shows promising results for Noom, a commercial app that offers daily informational reminders, tracking, virtual 1:1 behavior change coach, and support group, using psychological principles to encourage behavioral change (eChin et al. 2016; DeLuca et al., 2020).

04.

An unfinished agenda. Moving towards the behavioral professional.

Lessons drawn from behavioral science are increasingly being used to better understand and tackle intractable policy challenges. Nonetheless, dedicated, knowledgeable, well-meaning policy professionals are also subject to beliefs and attitudes that can result in biases, shaping their actions and impacting choices and success of policies or programs.

This note highlights how behavioral science can be used to mitigate such biases in policy and implementation contexts, but also for addressing bottlenecks linked with employees' motivations and organizational systems and processes that can shape policy professionals' attitudes and behaviors.

Providing policymakers and program implementers with more tools for effective program design and implementation, and with tools on how to use them and apply to their views of problems and solutions, can be an effective addition to existing strategies and plans and it may be the key to unlocking developing impacts at scale around the world.

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Annex 1

The three contexts of behavioral professionals in detail

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

How the "System" is Designed: Processes and Rules

The way institutions are set and organized (rules, procedures, systems for information flow) affects directly decision-making by influencing how policy professionals understand, adhere and follow specific parameters set. A clear, transparent and monitored process can lead to different decisions and behaviors than vague, ad hoc one. This can affect anything from strategy design, delegating tasks, hiring, to performance tracking (e.g. Delgado & Shealy, 2018).

How Performance is Assessed: Performance Monitoring and Feedback Cycles

Incentives (see individual context below) and monitoring ability affect program administration and implementation by policy professionals. Policies or programs may fail or deviate from their objectives due to principal-agent problems (e.g. supervisors and field staff, respectively), such as principal's (e.g. supervisors) inability to effectively monitor performance and agent's (e.g. field staff) poor compliance with implementation or avoidance of formal duties (Nathan & White, 2019; Banerjee et al, 2008).

Accountability to beneficiaries and observability of effort will also affect performance. Findings from Reinikka and Svensson (2001) nicely illustrate this by showing that leakage of public funds for education at the local government level in Uganda was dramatically reduced by decreasing the cost of acquiring information and exercising voice.

At the level of performance assessments, biases can result in incorrect evaluations of civil servants that may negatively affect performance. For example, experimental studies completed with public servants have documented the presence of halo effects, whereby those who were perceived to have higher skills along one dimension, were given higher scores on other dimensions, and therefore overall performance (Bellé et al. 2017, 2018). Outcome bias – or evaluation of the quality of decisions based on their outcomes with little regard for the presence of uncertainty at the time the decision was made – may also introduce distortions (König-Kersting et al, 2017).

Finally, policy professionals are challenged in terms of receiving asymmetric feedback. Namely, missing, infrequent, or delayed feedback regard-

ing the impact of decisions is likely to limit the ability to correct bias and improve decisions (Dudley & Xie, 2020).

Enabling Environment and Culture

Institutional culture and the hierarchy of social roles can also affect policy professionals' attitudes and behaviors (Galley et al. 2013). There are several other aspects of the work environment that managers can maneuver to shape employee performance. These include transparency and openness, which can promote increased perceptions of fairness and encourages feedback through more regular and honest communication between manager and civil servants. These conditions are referred to as "psychological safety," where team members hold beliefs of mutual trust and respect for each other, are comfortable being themselves, and believe that they will not be punished unduly for speaking their mind (Edmondson, 2018). Psychological safety is an important predictor of performance.

Organizational incentives, such as management practices rewarding information acquisition, have also been shown to mediate how policy officials receive and use new information to reduce errors in the information used to make decisions (Rogger & Somani, 2019). Additionally, institutions are social structures and norms can affect behavior (see group context below).

INDIVIDUAL CONTEXT

One's Motivation

This relates to how factors linked with the individual's desire to perform – such as goals and aspirations, expectations regarding the employment relationship, monetary and non-monetary rewards, perceptions about the need for the program/service, among others – affect his/her decision-making and behavior.

GOALS AND CAREER ASPIRATIONS

Goal setting as part of the performance evaluation process has been shown to be important in the public sector in that it can offer a tool for managers to motivate and improve performance (Paarlberg et al, 2008).

Promotion prospects and career advancement can also matter for performance. For instance, in a study in Zambia, Ashraf et al. (2015) showed that career incentives at the recruitment stage affected who self-selected into a public health job (skills and ambitions), attracting health workers who completed 29% more household visits and positively impacting program outcomes.

Another important dimension relates to the extent to which employers meet the psychological contract (i.e. individual beliefs, regarding terms of an exchange agreement between themselves and their organization). Breach of this contract has been shown to have an impact on several work-related outcomes, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, mistrust, and performance, among others (Zhao et al, 2007).

MONETARY AND NON-MONETARY INCENTIVES

Both monetary and non-monetary incentives can affect the performance of policy professionals (e.g. Ashraf et al 2014). Individuals can be positively and intrinsically motivated by public, peer, or supervisor recognition, and this can affect their persistency and/or productivity (e.g. Gauri et al, 2019; Grant 2008). Recognition can also be informal or intangible, for example, acknowledging good work behavior. This is a particularly useful practice for improving motivation and performance on day to day and more mundane tasks (Montgomery et al, 2008). Relatedly, individual's trust in his/her employer helps strengthen investment in nurturing the relationship and can promote reciprocity (Coyle-Shapiro, 2002).

(PERCEIVED) RELEVANCE OF WORK

The literature highlights the importance of interesting (and perceived importance of) work within public bureaucracies as a motivating factor (e.g. Wright et al, 2003). Moreover, field staff perceptions about the need for, and potential benefits of a given program, confidence in their ability to deliver, and skill proficiency impacts fidelity of implementation (Abry et al, 2013; Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Fidelity of implementation is likely to affect the program's effectiveness, and the perception of its success as a result.

CIVIC-MINDEDNESS

Studies have shown that civic-mindedness, or the individual's desire to provide public service, is positively associated with individual and organizational performance, job commitment, ethical behavior, among others (Ritz et al, 2016; Callen et al, 2018). For instance, Banuri and Keefer (2015) found that individuals with greater pro-social motivation exerted higher effort. The Public Sector Motivation questionnaire offers a measure of civic-mindedness, comprising six dimensions: Attraction to Policymaking, Commitment to Public Interest, Social Justice, Civic Duty, Compassion and Self-Sacrifice.

One's Interpretation

This relates to how factors linked with the way the individual processes information – such as mental models and beliefs about how the world works, cognitive biases affecting the interpretation of information, or availability of cognitive resources, among others – affect his/her decision-making and behavior.

MENTAL MODELS AND BELIEFS

Civil servant behavior can be influenced by deeply internalized beliefs about how the world works, also known as cultural schema or beliefs (DiMaggio, 1997). This includes the default associations, categories, concepts, identities, prototypes, stereotypes, causal narratives, and worldviews that we use to make sense of the world. These cultural schema shape perceptions and filter the "facts" that people believe, and affect decision-making and service delivery (World Bank, 2015). For instance, teachers can exhibit unconscious biases towards students based on socio-economic cues, which affect their evaluation of students' performance, learning ability and potential (World Bank, 2018).

COGNITIVE BIASES

Policymakers must deal with the interpretation of

data, such as when making decisions on allocation of funds based on data on program impacts. Yet, several individual cognitive biases have been documented among policy professionals that come in the way of objective and impartial decision-making and affect performance. For instance, they are subject to confirmation bias driven by ideological predisposition when interpreting data, "variance neglect" of impact evaluation results, availability bias when assessing information, sunk cost fallacy with regard to funds allocation, to mention only a few (Banuri et al., 2019; Battaglio et al., 2019; Vivalt & Coville, 2019;World Bank, 2015).

A recent study documented the presence of several of these in an experimental setup with managers and employees in the Italian public sector (Belle et al, 2018). Another study found that policymakers overweight positive impact evaluation results compared to negative results (overconfidence) and do not consider variance of results when updating (variance neglect) (Vivalt & Coville, 2019). In short, biases can affect how evidence is perceived in different ways, which can have large implications in a public policy context due to the potential weight of the decisions made on policy choices, design and implementation.

Skill level can attenuate effects of certain biases that require avoidance of heuristic errors (e.g. conjunction fallacy) (Baker et al, 2020). However, many biases such as confirmation bias, sunk cost and anchoring effects remain uncorrelated with cognitive ability (Stanovich & West, 2008). There is evidence that experience may play a role in some cases. For instance, more experienced bureaucrats tend to be more overconfident in assessing their expertise (Liu et al, 2017).

BANDWIDTH

Taxing mental bandwidth, or availability of cognitive resources, can impact decision-making. Making a series of difficult decisions, distraction and time pressure can constrain the ability to monitor decisions and notice possible errors (Soll, Milkman, & Payne, 2016). Milkman (2012) showed that incidental uncertainty reduces persistence on difficult tasks, possibly by causing ego-depletion and reducing self-control resources. It has also been shown that high workload can exacerbate implicit biases and discrimination of teachers towards students (Andersen & Guul, 2019).

One's Ability

This relates to how factors linked with the individual's skills – such as his/her knowledge, non-cognitive or soft skills, and technical ability – affect their decision making and behavior.

KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEFS

Policy professionals are responsible for policy decisions, implementation choices and operationalization. Their tacit knowledge and beliefs can influence attitudes towards beneficiaries and the information used for decision-making (Keulemans & Van de Walle, 2018; Rogger & Somani, 2019). A recent study with public officials in Ethiopia, showed that a large proportion of policy officials make substantial mistakes about the basic conditions of local jurisdictions, and that these errors predict distribution of economic resources, career success and productivity (Rogger & Somani, 2019).

On a slightly related note, Bergman et al (2019) showed that professionals displayed significant

misperceptions about take-up rates under automatic vs. opt-in enrollment. This is despite overwhelming evidence on the positive effects of defaults and illustrates how implementation specifics that can heavily affect impacts of programs but go unnoticed by policy professionals. When presented with evidence, they were nevertheless willing to pay 144% more for the technology under automatic enrollment.

NON-COGNITIVE SKILLS

Non-cognitive skills (or soft skills) include perseverance ("grit"), conscientiousness, self-control, attentiveness, self-efficacy, resilience to adversity, empathy, among others. In a comprehensive review of the literature, Kautz et al. (2014) provided evidence that that non-cognitive characteristics are often as predictive of economic success as cognitive skills. The Big Five personality traits (i.e. Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism) represent a commonly used taxonomy, and each trait comprises multiple facets and/or relates to different non-cognitive skills (for details see Kautz et al, 2014). Callen et al. (2018) recently showed that, in addition to incentives and public service motivation, personality traits/non-cognitive skills affect service public delivery (e.g. conscientiousness was positively associated with doctors' being at work during an unannounced visit). In another study, Kalaj, Rogger and Somani (2020) showed that locus of control, or the extent to which individuals base success on their own actions, mediated civil servants' time use at work and additional evidence suggest that locus of control may be associated with promotion opportunities, rewards and motivation (Kay, Rogger & Sen, 2019).

TECHNICAL SKILLS

Skill level may improve accuracy in judgment and decision-making (e.g. numeracy in the case of interpreting numerical data) and skill proficiency also impacts fidelity of implementation as mentioned above (Abry et al, 2013; Durlak & DuPre, 2008). However, technical skills are likely not to be sufficient for effective program implementation. Providers' expectations, motivation, confidence in the ability to deliver and sense of self-efficacy also play a role on the extent to which individuals adhere to the prescribed implementation practices (Durlak & DuPre 2008).

GROUP CONTEXT

Social Identity

Policy professionals' social identities can influence their behavior towards beneficiaries from the in- vs. out-group. Biases and stereotypes related to out-group beneficiaries can lead to discrimination in information provision and response quality by bureaucrats or field staff (e.g. White et al. 2015; Butler & Broockman 2011; Neggers 2018). Group identity can also prompt motivated reasoning and affect decision-making (see biases subsection above) (Nørgaard, 2018).

Empirical Expectations

Social norms influence decision-making and behavior, and whether the individual conforms to norms depends on empirical and normative expectations regarding others in their reference group. Empirical expectations (sometimes referred to as descriptive norms) refer to what we believe others to do (Bicchieri & Xiao, 2009). Individuals can have misperceptions about norms, and this can affect their behavior, including in the context of organizations. One such example is pluralist ignorance, whereby individuals underestimate the extent to which colleagues may share their reservations on a given subject and refrain from voicing their objective opinion (Westphal & Zajac, 2013).

Normative Expectations

Normative expectations (sometimes referred to as injunctive norms) refer to what we believe others think should be done/what is appropriate to do (Bicchieri & Xiao, 2009).). In an institutional context, there are often unwritten rules on actions are permissible, mandatory, or prohibited, which guide public officials' behavior, relationships with beneficiaries, and implementation process. Mangla (2015) notes that these bureaucratic norms influence how officials enact their responsibilities, deliver services or engage with beneficiaries, and can impact agencies ability to work effectively. In the context of corruption in a policy setting, research has documented the role that norms such as reciprocity, support of family, loyalty can play (Jackson & Köbis 2018; Scharbatke-Church & Chigas, 2019). When corruption is pervasive, in-group pressure can make behaving honestly costly (World Bank, 2017).

Annex 2

Common behavioral pitfalls among policy professionals

SELECTIVE PERCEPTION BIAS:

Tendency to fail to notice or more easily dismiss information that contradicts one's views or beliefs. Policy professionals' behavior can be influenced by deeply internalized beliefs about how the world works, also known as cultural schema or beliefs.

CONFIRMATION BIAS:

Tendency to search for, interpret, or favor information that support our pre-existing beliefs or ideological predispositions.

AVAILABILITY BIAS:

Tendency to think that examples that easily come to mind – such as those based on what one has observed or heard about (vs. statistics and historical facts) – are more representative than in actual reality.

STEREOTYPE BIAS:

Beliefs about a given social group reflective of the individual's underlying prejudices or other internal motivations. Typically centered around most distinctive features of the group, these can result in distorted emotions and perceptions of group members (e.g. Bordalo et al., 2016).

BIAS BLIND SPOT:

Tendency to perceive oneself as less biased than other people, which can lead to more easily ignoring the advice of peers or experts.

STATUS QUO BIAS:

Preference for avoiding change and resistance to adapt to new factors and circumstances.

IMPLICIT BIAS:

Mental associations that can lead to unintentional discrimination or stereotyping;

SOCIAL IDENTITY:

These can influence behavior towards beneficiaries from the in- vs. out-group (e.g. discrimination in information provision and response quality).

GROUP-THINKING:

Institutions are social structures, and individuals will at times conform to what is perceived as the group view and refrain from providing opposing ideas to avoid disagreement;

EMPIRICAL EXPECTATIONS:

Sometimes referred to as descriptive norms, these refer to what we believe others to do (Bicchieri & Xiao, 2009). Misperceptions about norms can negatively affect behavior (e.g. pluralist ignorance,

whereby individuals underestimate the extent to which colleagues may share their reservations and refrain from voicing their objective opinion).

NORMATIVE EXPECTATIONS:

Sometimes referred to as injunctive norms, these refer to what we believe others think should be done/what is appropriate to do (Bicchieri & Xiao, 2009). In an institutional context, there are often unwritten rules on actions are permissible, mandatory, or prohibited, which guide public officials' behavior, relationships with beneficiaries, and implementation process.

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