Executive summary

The human dimension of integrity policies

Human behaviour is often a neglected dimension in integrity policy making. Traditionally, efforts to prevent corruption have been based on a rational decision-making model. This has led to policy recommendations that favour applying control and sanctions, and reducing the discretion of decision makers in order to diminish their scope for misbehaviour.

Behavioural insights enable policy makers to integrate two often-overlooked aspects into integrity policies: first, at the core of integrity is an ethical choice based on individual moral reflection. Second, social dynamics affect individual behaviour. Integrity is influenced by society, peers, neighbours and colleagues. Integrating the dynamics and pitfalls of these two core aspects can help policy makers design modern, effective integrity policies.

Central findings of behavioural sciences

Normally, policies to strengthen integrity are designed on the assumption that decision makers are motivated to act ethically. Indeed, the majority of people feel committed to integrity and think that they generally act accordingly. Yet, in reality, people are less consistent and less categorical in their ethical decisions than they admit to themselves. Sometimes a person is not even aware when their behaviour diverges from ethical standards. This is because justifications and biased judgment blur the perception of integrity breaches. Public policies can, therefore, affect individuals' moral choices by emphasising or raising their moral reference points:

- There is broad evidence that a small message, a “moral reminder”, can be sufficient to induce ethical reflection. Such moments of ethical reflection can be integrated in many policies.
- Moreover, moral choices can be invoked be by creating commitments and by mentally preparing individuals for ethical temptations.
- Finally, over-strict control can have adverse effects. Excessive monitoring of a trust-based rule might drive people to disregard the rule, and create an entry-point for severe misconduct.

Ethical choices are not made in isolation, but as part of social interaction. What others think or do matters. Integrity policies can be improved by taking into account the social environment in which they are applied. Guilt is smaller when shared, which means that when several people jointly engage in misconduct, each of them feels less responsible. Spreading the burden of responsibility over too many people can create an integrity risk.

Furthermore, upholding the public interest can be understood as an act of indirect reciprocity, carried out in the trust that others will do the same and the belief that integrity
benefits all. Integrity policies can reinforce such behaviour by creating an institutional setting in which the adherence to integrity is seen as the norm. Enforcing this norm, in turn, requires a balance between building trust and strictly investigating and sanctioning violations. Behavioural insights have shown that these two functions gain credibility when they are separated, e.g. executed by different institutions.

Finally, a group that has collectively de-stigmatized corrupt behaviours might find itself in a collective action trap. In this situation, an individual’s motivation to act with integrity is no longer sufficient to break the vicious cycle and moral appeals will fall on deaf ears. Such situations need to be identified and systematically addressed through interventions from outside the group and strict enforcement.

Applying behavioural insights to integrity policies

This report highlights two ways in which the application of behavioural insights can lead to new, more effective integrity policies. The first is using behavioural evidence to rethink existing integrity policies and systems. Indeed, the behavioural approach addresses some of the challenges related to traditional anti-corruption policies, while emphasising the importance of promoting trust and an organisational culture of integrity. Some examples are:

- Behavioural pitfalls could be identified in the way responsibilities are assigned in an integrity system. Structures that diffuse responsibility (e.g. involving many actors, ensuring integrity merely through formal requirements) could create integrity risks.
- Ethical reflections integrated in certain procedures, especially those that carry a high risk of corruption, could ensure that integrity is not overlooked in a public official’s everyday routine. Requiring a personal signature on paperwork, for example, can invoke stronger personal ethical engagement.

The second way behavioural insights can be applied is in a specific, limited intervention to fix a behavioural pitfall, improve an existing policy or encourage certain behaviour. Behavioural interventions are based on knowledge of human behavioural biases, cognitive limitations and social preferences. Such interventions often take the form of a “nudge” – a subtle change in the way a decision presents itself to help individuals make a better choice for their own benefit. Some examples are:

- Request a conflict of interest declaration from each team member at the beginning of a new project by default.
- Inform public officials that “96% of colleagues have already submitted their asset declarations” to encourage them to do the same.
- Create a quiz on the code of ethics to encourage staff to read it actively and transfer knowledge.

Behavioural sciences can provide inspiration for innovative, modern integrity policies that harness the human factor in the fight against corruption. The OECD has long supported practitioners in scoping the potential of behavioural insights, which are now being applied in various areas of public policy and public institutions globally. Exploring the implications of insights on ethical behaviour is the starting point for meaningful changes in the area of integrity and anti-corruption policies.