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CEPA strategy guidance note on

Promotion of coherent policymaking

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The United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA) has developed a set of principles of effective governance for sustainable development. The essential purpose of these voluntary principles is to provide interested countries with practical, expert guidance on a broad range of governance challenges associated with the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. CEPA has identified 62 commonly used strategies to assist with the operationalization of these principles. This guidance note addresses the promotion of coherent policymaking, which is associated with the principle of sound policymaking and can contribute to strengthening the effectiveness of institutions. It is part of a series of such notes prepared by renowned experts under the overall direction of the CEPA Secretariat in the Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

In reading this guidance note, individuals in government ministries and agencies who are less familiar with the topic will be able to understand the fundamentals. Those who have perhaps taken initial steps in this area with limited follow-through or impact will be able to identify how to adjust elements of their practice to achieve better results and to better embed and institutionalize the strategy in their organizations. Those who are more advanced in the promotion of coherent policymaking will be able to recognize the practices which contribute to its success.

Understanding the strategy

Coherent policymaking is a key aspect of effective governance for sustainable development, which has received significantly increased interest with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. As a response to the interconnected nature of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), there is a renewed drive for policy coherence and integrated approaches in the policy debate around the implementation of the Agenda. Policy coherence also has its own target (SDG 17.14).

A fundamental premise of policy coherence is that there are interlinkages and mutual dependencies in the 2030 Agenda and that interactions take place between the Agenda's different policy domains. Achieving, or making progress on, one target can either boost progress on another target ("synergy") or make it more difficult to achieve another target ("trade-off"). Recognizing these interdependencies and interactions – "the integrated nature of the SDGs", as the 2030 Agenda preamble puts it – is a key first step to ensure that public policies are coherent with one another and will achieve their intended results.

This insight is of course not new, and neither is the idea of coherent policymaking. Its roots trace back to the principles of rational decision-making and have been addressed in public administration for decades, mostly under the concept of "coordination", and in connection to development cooperation, as "policy coherence for development". Broadly, it can be defined as the process of policymaking that systematically considers the pursuit of multiple policy goals in a coordinated way, minimizing trade-offs and contradictions, and maximizing synergies. Coherent policymaking is pursued because it is assumed to lead to increased levels of efficiency and effectiveness when taking a broader view of government. Coherence can be pursued, and assessed, at all stages of policymaking, from agenda framing and goal setting, to the process of policy instrument design, implementation on the ground and follow up and evaluation.

The absence of coherence may result in many types of governance problems, such as compartmentalization, fragmentation, competing and incoherent objectives, and inconsistent policy mixes.¹ These problems may be aggravated when governments seek to deal with cross-cutting policy agendas. Furthermore, a lack of coherence can also result in unclear signals to the general public about the relative importance of policy priorities.²

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a central voice on policy coherence, recently extended the definition of the Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD) concept beyond the fostering of synergies and trade-offs across sectors in a jurisdiction to also reconcile domestic policy with internationally agreed objectives; and to

¹ Candel, J. and R. Biesbrock, 2016, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11077-016-9248-y>

² May, P., et al, 2006, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1541-0072.2006.00178.x>

address the transboundary and long-term effects of policies. These extensions can be considered expressions of the universality principle in the 2030 Agenda.

Thus, it is possible to distinguish several dimensions of coherent policymaking:

- Horizontal coherence – between sectors in a jurisdiction, or cross-cutting issues in multiple sectors.
- Vertical coherence – between local plans and actions; national policy; and international agreements; or between national policy and local plans and implementation measures.
- International coherence – between policy domains in different countries, addressing transboundary spillover effects.

Additional dimensions have also been suggested in the literature, such as between measures within an individual agency (intra-agency coherence); between different international agreements (institutional interplay management); between donors and donor-partners (inter-agency coherence – for the specific case of development cooperation); and between goals, instruments and implementation (institutional coherence).

This Note primarily uses a horizontal coherence perspective, although many of the methods and approaches discussed can also be adapted and applied to vertical and international coherence.

A strategy of coherent policymaking is typically seen as a policy-learning strategy. The underlying theory of change is premised on improved access to knowledge and perspectives across government departments, which, together with better cooperation and more effective interfaces between domains, will trigger insights and greater recognition of a broader set of priorities and interests. Improved access to knowledge can sometimes be achieved by getting the right people in the room, but it can also be important to incorporate scientific expertise and evidence in useable and accessible forms into the policymaking process. The inclusion of such expertise can lead to greater coordination and more effective policies, either at the goal-setting or sectoral instrument levels or through the creation of policies that embrace several domains.

Policy coherence as an objective does not normally specify any absolute level of achievement. Rather, coherent policymaking reflects a constant aspiration for the enhancement of policy impact. The “ambition level” in terms of coherence is usually unspecified. For example, the aim of coherent policymaking may be to mitigate contradictions between policies, pursue synergies among policies and actions, or entirely join-up strategies towards common or shared policy objectives.³ As a result, policy coherence can be measured along a scale (see Methods of implementation), and the appropriate ambition level will depend on the institutional context and the organizations and issues at play.

³Or “collaboration-coordination-integration”, see Stead, D. and E. Meijers, 2009, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14649350903229752>

Public sector situation and trends

Coherence originates in the professional fields of rational decision-making and public administration. Historically, the literature has been concerned with policy coordination,⁴ and has more recently begun to include policy integration⁵ and joined-up government.⁶

Agenda 21 of 1992 called for integrated planning, policy and management (Chapter 8, section A7). Coherence gained strong momentum in the early 2000s in the area of development assistance, under the banner of Policy Coherence for Development (PCD). For example, the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD pushed for better coordination between donors and for the alignment of development assistance with national priorities in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness of 2005. In the area of PCD, the need to consider the impact on developing countries when formulating domestic policy in other domains was also stressed. This idea was included in Millennium Development Goal (MDG)⁸, which placed an emphasis on coherence beyond aid policies themselves.

Certain countries made a strong effort for “joined-up government” in the 1990s, for example the European Union, the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland and the United Kingdom, which prided itself on having a “Rolls Royce” coordination system⁸ (see Methods of implementation).

Growing academic interest in policy coherence followed public administration trends and experiences in the 2000s. From this a general view emerged that coherent policymaking:

- constitutes a quality of governance characterized by the intentional and systematic linking of objectives, goals, actors, procedures (such as joint decision-making, collaboration and conflict resolution) or instruments; and
- is approached by collaborative and non-adversarial relationships vertically (across organizational levels); and/or horizontally (between sectors) in policy and administrative bodies.

Promotion of coherent policymaking in the context of the 2030 Agenda

Although earlier efforts were made and lessons learned in the context of OECD countries, in more recent years, with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, developing countries have worked intensively to establish good practices and institutional arrangements for coherent policymaking with particular regard for the SDGs.

⁴ Peters, B., 1998, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1467-9299.00102>

⁵ Tosun, J. and A. Lang, 2017, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01442872.2017.1339239>

⁶ Bogdanor, V., 2005, <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/joined-up-government-9780197263334?cc=no&lang=en&>

⁷ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/Agenda21.pdf>

⁸ <https://ntouk.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/wiring-it-up-2000.pdf>

Many countries have aligned their development strategies and/or national development plans with the SDGs. The Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of 2020 show that countries continue to make significant progress in integrating the SDGs into national development plans and sectoral strategies, as well as the elaboration of indicators. A number of specific institutional mechanisms have been consistently reported in the VNRs, to facilitate decision-making and coordination for implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Many inter-ministerial committees and commissions have been created, with some chaired or overseen by the Head of State or Government.⁹ The United Nations system has mobilized to present support, approaches and platforms for coherence and integration. Coherence has clearly taken a front seat in the discussions and is increasingly visible in the VNRs presented to the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF).

The issue of international coherence is also growing in importance in recent developments around green deals and increasing interest in a new generation of industrial policy, where there is a clear recognition that better coordination or joining-up is needed across domains such as climate policy, economic policy and international trade policy.

Barriers and limits

A case has been made in the literature to move the debate beyond mainstream calls for “more coherence” as a silver bullet in an increasingly complex world, to a more cautious and nuanced view on the limits of coherence, and what level of coherence is “good enough.” This also takes into account that some policy conflicts cannot be fully resolved and that policymaking requires prioritization based on the agendas of the political majority and the government.

Barriers to coherence need to be recognized up front. It is true that a lack of coherence could be the result of insufficient communication, funding, knowledge, or spaces to meet and coordinate, which are issues that are relatively easy to rectify with added resources. However, barriers may also be more intractable, as they can be deeply rooted in institutions, routines or standard operating procedures in government administrations. Lack of coherence may be a result of inherently conflicting interests and mandates, such as conflicts between nature conservation interests and infrastructure development interests. Although often avoided in official policy documents, such as the 2030 Agenda, such factors and considerations need to be addressed when pursuing measures for more coherent policymaking.

The academic literature has also found that governments may lack both the resources and/or the political will to move beyond symbolic action for more coherence. The National Sustainable Development Strategies (NSDS) from the early 2000s are a case in point. Committed to in Agenda 21 in 1992, and reconfirmed in the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, the process around these strategies was marginalized

⁹ <https://publicadministration.un.org/en/Research/World-Public-Sector-Reports>. See also the 2020 VNR Synthesis Report: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/27027VNR_Synthesis_Report_2020.pdf

in most countries and ended up far from key government decision-making circles. The political and administrative impetus for building sustainability strategies resurfaced with the 2030 Agenda. The lessons learned from the NSDS process 20 years ago have induced many countries to consider a mainstreaming approach into existing mechanisms instead of a separate mechanism for SDGs.

Coherence generates important benefits, as has been discussed earlier, but it also comes with some potential downsides, from the perspective of an individual agency. Addressing these concerns head on may help pave the way for introducing more coherent policymaking processes. Such concerns include:

- blurred lines of accountability;
- more time-consuming processes;
- uprooting of existing routines and practices;
- difficulty measuring impact and/or effectiveness;
- loss of control/influence/autonomy; and
- dilution of priorities.¹⁰

It is also important to consider that perceptions can vary a great deal across actors in a government. Some departments will easily accept mechanisms that establish clear boundaries but with communication channels and room for action; others will want to follow a more joined-up and collective approach; and others may have witnessed failures from earlier whole-of-government attempts and will want to see concrete action before committing.¹¹

Although methods of implementation (see below) often describe a “staged” approach to policy coherence, the reality of policymaking is often a more chaotic process, containing a wide range of inputs, values and priorities that are both internal to the government and external and require mediation, negotiation and brokering. Governments increasingly need to leverage expertise, action, commitments and funding from a wide range of actors to achieve the 2030 Agenda, rendering the pursuit of policy coherence even more complicated.

Keeping these barriers and caveats in mind, it is necessary to apply a flexible and inclusive approach, that is adapted to the specific national, institutional and historical context, to establish mechanisms for coherent policymaking in order to gain acceptance and ownership for both the principle itself and its deployment. The section on Methods of implementation presents some of the arrangements, methods and tools that can be deployed in this pursuit.

¹⁰ Adapted from: <https://ntouk.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/wiring-it-up-2000.pdf>

¹¹ Molenveld, A., et al, 2019, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/puar.13136>

Measuring progress

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has developed a composite indicator framework for SDG 17.14: enhance policy coherence for sustainable development. This indicator framework includes eight domains with each scored on a 0 to 10-point scale.¹²

The composite indicator framework covers progress measurements related to 1. Institutionalized political commitment; 2. Long-term considerations; 3. Inter-ministerial and cross-sectoral coordination; 4. Participatory processes; 5. Integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development, assessment of policy effects and linkages; 6. Consultation and coordination across government levels; 7. Monitoring and reporting for policy coherence; and 8. Financial resources and tools.

The indicator framework draws upon concepts and mechanisms that are sometimes labelled differently although they address the same objective, such as “whole of government” or “integrated approach”. This Note uses the same logic below, in presenting the methods of implementation.

Methods of implementation

Although coherent policymaking can be considered aspirational, and therefore not intended to be rigidly implemented, different methods and mechanisms can be used to facilitate the work. For example, coherence can be considered in the input-output-outcome classification commonly used in performance evaluations.¹³

- *Inputs* made by governments to promote integrated policymaking and policy coherence, such as creation of new institutions or coordination mechanisms for SDG implementation.
- *Processes* that take place in relation to collaboration and coordination, such as coordination meetings, joint policy documents, and consultations with stakeholders, among others.
- *Outcomes/performance*, such as:
 - the degree to which the various legal and regulatory instruments covering specific sectors/areas are consistent;
 - the degree to which the interests of all relevant stakeholders are considered and balanced; and

¹² <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata/files/Metadata-17-14-01.pdf>.

¹³ See, for example, World Public Sector Report, 2018 (UNDESA); <https://publicadministration.un.org/Portals/1/Images/WorldPublicSector/World%20Public%20Sector%20report%202018%20Full%20report.pdf>

- the adequacy of resources of all relevant actors and levels of government to act on the issue in question.
- *Impacts*, which are the indicators for the issue at hand that show progress in the right direction.

Diagnostic methods and measures for action are discussed and differentiated below. A typical starting point is the diagnostic assessment of the current system, to characterize the relationship between government entities, through a coherence scale; examine policy decisions and practices; and understand the substantive relationship of policy systems, through the mapping of interactions.

Diagnostic coherence scale

Coherence scales exist in different forms and can be used as a diagnostic tool to characterize the different types of relationships between domains in the governance system. For example, Metcalfe's scale on policy coordination contains nine levels:¹⁴

9. Unified Government Strategy
8. Setting Common Priorities
7. Establishing Common Parameters
6. Arbitration of Trade-offs & Conflicts
5. Search for Policy Consensus (Conflict Management)
4. Avoiding Policy Divergences (Speaking with One Voice)
3. Consultation among Ministries (Feedback)
2. Exchange of Information among Ministries (Communication)
1. Ministries Manage Independently within their Jurisdictions

The scale can be described as cumulative, since the higher levels, such as setting common priorities and establishing common parameters, depend on the effectiveness of lower-level processes such as exchange of information and consultation. If organizations cannot, at the very least, avoid overt conflict and speak with one voice in public (level 4), it will be very difficult for them to confront and resolve the conflicts that may arise in formulating common policies. Strengthening lower-level capacities not only solves simpler coordination problems but also develops habits and practices of teamwork which make it easier to deal with more difficult problems when they arise.

¹⁴ Metcalfe, L., 1994, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/002085239406000208>

There are scales with fewer steps, such as the typology where actors are: United – Cooperating – Coordinating – Coexisting – Competing,¹⁵ where the three first types could be considered three levels of ambition for policy coherence.

While a general coherence scale can provide general understanding, it is useful to carry out a diagnostic assessment with more specificity, using a scale approach along different key dimensions or factors. Table 1 presents an assessment framework at the level of policy framing, policy goals, policy instruments, and procedural instruments.

Table 1. Assessment framework for goals and instruments¹⁶

	Low level of coherence		High level of coherence	
Policy framing	Issues defined in narrow terms, the cross-cutting nature is not recognized, and the problem is considered to fall within the boundaries of a specific subsystem. Efforts of other subsystems are not understood to be part of the governance of the problem.	There is awareness that the policy outputs of different subsystems shape policy outcomes as well as an emerging notion of externalities. The problem is still perceived as falling within the boundaries of one subsystem.	As a result of increasing awareness of the cross-cutting nature of the problem, an understanding that the governance of the problem should not be restricted to a single domain has emerged as well as associated notions of coordination and coherence.	General recognition that the problem is and should not solely be governed by subsystems, but by the governance system as a whole. Subsystems work according to a shared, 'holistic' approach, which is particularly recognized within procedural instruments that span subsystems.
Policy goals	Concerns only embedded within the goals of a dominant subsystem. Cross-cutting nature not recognized, subsystems highly autonomous in setting goals.	Concerns adopted in policy goals of one or more additional subsystems. Because of rising awareness of mutual concerns, subsystems address these to some extent in their goals.	Possible further diversification across policy goals of additional subsystems. Coordinated sectoral goals, which are judged in the light of coherence.	Concerns embedded within all potentially relevant policy goals. Shared policy goals embedded within an overarching strategy.
Policy instruments	Problem only addressed by the instruments of a dominant subsystem. Sets of instruments are purely sectoral and result from processes of policy layering.	One or more additional subsystems (partially) adapt their instruments to consider externalities of instrument mixes in light of internal	Possible further diversification of instruments addressing the problem across subsystems. Subsystems seek to jointly address the problem by adjusting and attuning their	Instruments embedded within all potentially relevant subsystems and associated policies. Full consideration of subsystems, resulting in a cross-subsystem instrument mix that is

¹⁵ De Coning, C. and K. Friis, 2011, https://brill.com/view/journals/joup/15/1-2/article-p243_12.xml?language=en

¹⁶ Adapted from Candell, J. and R. Biesbrock, 2016, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11077-016-9248-y>

	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: center;"> Low level of coherence ↔ High level of coherence </div>			
		and inter-sectoral consistency.	instruments. Consistency becomes an explicit aim.	designed to meet a set of coherent goals.
Procedural instruments	No relevant procedural instruments exist across departments.	Some procedural information sharing instruments across departments.	Increasing number of system-level procedural instruments that facilitate jointly addressing the problem.	Broad range of procedural instruments at system-level, including boundary-spanning structures that coordinate, steer and monitor efforts.

Mapping SDG interactions

Coherent policymaking requires the systematic consideration of interactions between economic, social and environmental spheres. Until recently, however, knowledge of such interactions has been fragmented and incomplete. As the implementation of the SDGs deepens, methods and tools to further such knowledge have started to emerge in recent years. This marks a clear and distinct role for scientific knowledge and evidence as a basis for coherent policymaking. For example, in the literature, there is much written about systems analysis to allow decision makers to identify trade-offs and synergies in support of coherent policymaking. The International Science Council’s (ISC) “interactions approach,”¹⁷ the SDG Synergies Approach¹⁸ and various integrated modelling efforts (iSDGs¹⁹, TWI2050²⁰ and CLEWS²¹) are examples of methods that lay the groundwork for coherent policymaking by illuminating the interlinkages between different policy domains, be it in quantitative terms, through statistical methods or through the solicitation of information from experts. ISC has presented a resource that facilitates a more in-depth understanding of the positive and negative interactions among the SDGs with a seven-point scale to score synergies and trade-offs between two policy goals or domains (see Table 2).

¹⁷ <https://council.science/publications/a-guide-to-sdg-interactions-from-science-to-implementation/>

¹⁸ www.sdg synergies.org

¹⁹ <https://www.millennium-institute.org/isdg>

²⁰ <https://iiasa.ac.at/web/home/research/twi/TWI2050.html>

²¹ <https://sdgintegration.undp.org/climate-land-use-energy-and-water-systems-clews-models>

Table 2. Types of interactions between SDGs²²

<p>Positive interactions</p> <p>+3 Indivisible is the highest form of positive interaction. It means that one result will automatically lead to another. For example, improvements in air quality will automatically result in improved respiratory health. In less-developed countries, improvement in girls' education will improve maternal health outcomes.</p> <p>+2 Reinforcing is a synergistic effect. Investment in one interaction will increase the momentum of another. For example, progress on increasing economic benefits from marine resources <i>reinforces</i> the creation of decent jobs and small enterprise in sectors such as tourism.</p> <p>+1 Enabling is a weaker form of positive interaction. Water availability <i>enables</i> increased agricultural productivity. In other words, improving one result creates a "necessary but insufficient condition" for furthering another. For example, providing electricity access in rural homes creates the conditions for/enables doing homework at night and thus should lead to improved school results.</p> <p>Negative interactions</p> <p>-1 Constraining is when one target limits the options for achieving another target. It does not necessarily make it more difficult or expensive to achieve, but it does result in more limited options. For example, preventing marine pollution from land-based activities <i>constrains</i> industrialization and limits growth in the industry's share of GDP. Protecting the climate <i>constrains</i> the options for delivering energy services (to low-carbon forms).</p> <p>-2 Counteracting is when making progress on one target will make it more difficult to reach another. For example, boosting a country's economic growth might <i>counteract</i> the reduction of waste. Ensuring access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food can <i>counteract</i> sustainable water withdrawals and reduction of chemicals releases in cases where gardens or green vegetables are more water and agrochemical intense than cereal-based produce.</p> <p>-3 Cancelling is the strongest form of negative interaction. It means that if you make progress on one target you will reverse progress on another. It can be thought of as a "true" goal conflict, which cannot be reconciled and requires conflict resolution. For example, promoting imports from developing countries <i>cancels</i> the sourcing of locally produced foods. Exploiting an area to develop infrastructure <i>cancels</i> the conservation of natural wildlife habitats.</p>

Actions to enhance coherence

Once the diagnostic has been carried out, different institutional measures can be enacted. Across the literature, the following process instruments, methods or measures are often suggested, and can be used as qualitative indicators to measure progress for more coherent policymaking (such as in the indicator framework for SDG 17.14.1).

- Establishing a high-level interagency committee, hosted by a high-ranking ministry, or the center of government. Cutting through the barriers to coherence requires strong incentives to do so, such as if governments demonstrate political commitment at the highest level.
- Establishing a coordinated institutional mechanism building formal or semiformal partnerships and processes for sharing and learning across ministries. It is important that investments are made to involve the implementing ministries in the design process.
- Conducting simulation and mapping exercises of integrated policy analysis such as SDG synergies mapping, or integrated modelling.

²² Adapted from Nilsson, M., et al, 2016, <https://www.nature.com/news/policy-map-the-interactions-between-sustainable-development-goals-1.20075>

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- Arranging multi-stakeholder consultation forums including with local levels of governance.
- Ensuring SDGs are visible and mainstreamed in national policy bills, development planning, finances and strategies.
- Requiring strategic impact assessments of draft policy bills to ensure that SDGs are taken into account in policy and planning.
- Imposing mandates and reporting requirements of SDGs across ministries and agencies (so called sector-responsibility).
- Engaging in international cooperation and peer learning around integrated action and policy coherence.

Additional methods and measures can be derived from practice and insights into the following public administration concepts and approaches.

Joined-up government

Joined-up government (or “whole of government”), pursued most notably by the United Kingdom, has been defined as: “Coordination of activities of various public sector organizations in such a way that eventual recipients of services are not bothered with existing boundaries between organizations.” Lessons from the joined-up government literature include the importance of a hybrid approach between bottom up and top-down approaches. Commitment from the top is critical – without it, there is limited impetus for individuals to challenge or change entrenched cultures and ways of working. At the same time, it is the actors at lower levels that have the knowledge and agency to grasp opportunities for joined-up action. For service delivery, such coordination demonstrates the importance of engaging non-governmental actors at the local level in collaborative working arrangements based on a high degree of trust. It also emphasizes the notion of craftsmanship or entrepreneurship to exploit collaborative opportunities, which often requires stepping outside formal structures and rules in order to facilitate joined-up working.²³

OECD building blocks of policy coherence for sustainable development

The OECD Recommendation on Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD) comes from a joint proposal from the Development Assistance Committee and the Public Governance Committee. It presents a set of eight principles for promoting PCSD, which are organized under three main pillars:

1. A strategic vision for implementing the 2030 Agenda underpinned by a clear political commitment and leadership to enhance policy coherence for sustainable development.
2. Effective and inclusive institutional and governance mechanisms to address policy interactions across sectors and align actions between levels of government.

²³ Carey, G. and B. Crammond, 2015, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01900692.2014.982292>

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3. A set of responsive and adaptive tools to anticipate, assess and address the domestic, transboundary and long-term impacts of policies.

OECD has published typologies and handbooks. They present building blocks of coherence together with an indicator framework composed of eight sub indicators/mechanisms. These building blocks represent institutional structures, systems, processes and working methods, which are essential drivers for improving policy coherence in pursuing the SDGs.

Policy integration

Policy integration is a lens on horizontal coherence which usually focuses on processes and institutional arrangements, although in practice integration and coherence are used interchangeably. Policy integration gained traction in particular in the European Union in the 1990s. A relatively large body of academic literature and policy experience exists to draw upon, including identified success factors for policy integration in the normative framework, cognitive and analytical capacities, and institutional arrangements. Experience indicates the need for mandates and specific measures for policy integration as well as strategic or institutional frameworks that allow for a new logic of cross-sectoral collaboration and shared priorities to emerge. Also, in the realm of the SDGs, approaches for cross-sector planning and decision-making are increasingly discussed, for example in the VNRs, including a shift to more integrated approaches. Much of the discourse revolves around institutions but empirical work also points to an important role for actors in the system, such as policy entrepreneurs to cross policy boundaries, through issue promotion, expansion of issue arenas and coalition building.

Impact assessment

In the phase of policy instrument preparation and design, methods of impact assessment are used to check on the coherence or consistency of policies. Impact assessment is the *ex ante* assessment of new plans or policy proposals in terms of their impact on different sustainability parameters, often with a focus on the environmental and social dimensions of sustainability. It came from the long tradition and experience of Environmental Impact Assessments, which have been used in most Member States for several decades. [Details of impact assessment methods are beyond the scope of this Note.]

Multi-stakeholder engagement methods

Coherent policymaking is widely understood to depend on the engagement of different stakeholders, and often calls for multi-stakeholder participation. The 2030 Agenda emphasizes that “all countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, will implement this plan.” Coherent implementation of the SDGs requires mechanisms for dialogue and engagement whereby governments and key stakeholders can come together to identify common challenges, set priorities, contribute to the development of laws and regulations, align policies and actions, and mobilize resources for sustainable development. Enabling effective stakeholder engagement implies that all stakeholders should have fair and equitable access to the decision-making process in order to balance policy debates and avoid the capture of public

policies by narrow interest groups. [Details of stakeholder engagement methods are beyond the scope of this Note.]

Case study

Colombia, which was an international champion of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, has made significant efforts to establish arrangements for coherent policymaking for the implementation of the SDGs. As a country that has relatively recently emerged from a deep internal conflict, the peace and reconciliation process remains a top priority for the Government of Colombia, and there have been extraordinary efforts made to build governance to reduce the gap between urban and rural environments and build trust and inclusion in the development process; and to promote alignment with the 2030 Agenda across all levels of governance. A crucial tenet of the peace process has been to reduce the gap between urban and rural territorial environments and build trust and inclusion in governance across all levels, and with coordination between central and local levels in focus. Coherence efforts should be understood with this context in mind.

The National Development Plan for 2014–2018, which predated the formal adoption of the 2030 Agenda (September 2015), had already incorporated the SDGs (92 of the 169 targets were incorporated). Also predating adoption, in February 2015, the institutional foundations were laid with Presidential Decree 280 that established the “High-Level Interinstitutional Commission for an effective implementation of the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the SDGs”. The Commission represents a significant political commitment for coherence at the national level. It is chaired by the head of the National Planning Department with ministerial level representation across the government under the guidance of the Office of the President.

It monitors, follows up on and evaluates the achievement of the SDG targets, with the explicit goal of facilitating coordination across development sectors. The Commission works with a Technical Secretariat led by the Directorate of Evaluation and Monitoring of Public Policies from the National Planning Department of Colombia (DNP, for its acronym in Spanish). Also, both the Commission and the Technical Secretariat interface with representatives from civil society, the private sector and academia, among others. For example, through multilevel consultations, DNP made efforts to identify interlinkages among SDGs at the national level in order to frame national planning.

The Commission and the DNP delivered the Strategy for the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in Colombia. Adopted in March 2018 by the National Council for Social and Economic Policy (CONPES – Policy Document 3918 of 2018), the strategy sets out the national targets for 2030 and the strategies for achieving them. It establishes four main policy actions: guidelines for monitoring and reporting, a plan to strengthen statistical data collection, a roadmap to articulate the implementation process with subnational governments and actions to promote the participation and engagement of different stakeholders and mobilize financial resources.

Currently, 98 per cent of the indicators included in the National Development Plan (2018–2022) have a clear linkage with one or more SDGs. Colombia has also incorporated the SDGs into other policy documents (e.g. Cities, Food and Nutritional Security, Equity, and Gender).

At the national level, Colombia has explicitly connected the SDGs to the national budget. The budget is encoded with tags for specific cross-sectoral and sub-sectoral topics, which can then be tracked throughout the budget plan. Building on institutionalised budgeting practices, the planning process and institutionalised coordination mechanisms established for SDG implementation, Colombia has emerged as a leader on SDG budgeting. A sign of further coherent policymaking is the emerging integration of the 2030 Agenda with the national science, technology and innovation (STI) policy. In recent years, the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (Colciencias) has joined the High-level Commission and has promoted linkages between Colombia’s science and technology agenda and the 2030 Agenda.

Importantly, Colombia’s coherence efforts also extend to subnational levels. The government has encouraged newly elected authorities to adopt local development plans that aim to integrate the SDGs. The DNP developed an online toolkit to lend technical support to the new local governments when formulating their respective Territorial Development Plans. The Plans, including objectives, indicators, and investments, all incorporated the SDGs to some degree. At the local level, with support from the national government, 32 departments and 31 capital cities adopted local development plans that include localised SDG targets. Colombia follows up on the extent to which local governments consider the SDGs and equivalent goals and targets in their development plans and has made efforts to build capacity for monitoring and indicator work at the local and regional levels, also considering the availability of data to measure indicators at the subnational and local levels.²⁴

Peer-to-peer learning and research

The research available to date on the impacts of efforts for more coherent policymaking is still in its infancy and is mostly made up of collections of case studies and illustrative examples. The available empirical research into country efforts for coherence shows that there are clear signs of measures and approaches taken to promote coherence, but it is generally too early to tell whether decisions and outputs are actually more coherent. Work is ongoing to define the appropriate variables and indicators, as described above.

The two most active international policy learning networks in the policy coherence domain are OECD and its reports and platforms on Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development;²⁵

²⁴ Sources: Colombia Voluntary National Review 2016, 2018; World Public Sector Report, 2018; and author’s consultations with DNP, December 2020.

²⁵ <http://www.oecd.org/gov/pcsd/>

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and UNDP and its platform for integrated approaches.²⁶ The OECD platform²⁷ includes country profiles of policy coherence and holds regular meetings with member states and maintains a help desk to provide information and support to governments.

Additionally, materials are available across the United Nations system, for example the UNDP Poverty Environment Initiative that recently published *Lessons on Integrated Approaches to Sustainable Development from the Poverty-Environment Initiative 2005–2018*²⁸; and the UN Environment Management Group’s “Nexus Dialogues Visualization Tool”.²⁹

The annual High-level Political Forum (HLPF) is the main official mechanism under ECOSOC for peer-to-peer learning between United Nations Member States on the implementation and follow up of the SDGs. Through the Voluntary National Reviews submitted annually to the HLPF, countries share lessons and information about institutional mechanisms for coherent policymaking. Over time the VNR submissions have included more information about which coherence and integrated approaches countries are putting in place.

Regional United Nations’ commissions have also established peer to peer learning and exchange of good practices to support VNR processes (see below).

Another United Nations-linked science-policy institution that follows the issue is the International Group of Scientists, which produces the Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR).³⁰ At the time of writing, a new international group of scientists had begun to prepare the next GSDR for publication in 2023.

Research networks in academia are not formed in the area of policy coherence, but there are pockets that take an interest in the issue, including scholars in political science. The Earth System Governance³¹ network has an affiliated research project³² centred in Utrecht University on global goals and governance.

Science-policy institutes and think tanks have been active. For example, an International Science Council-facilitated network³³ and several international think tanks³⁴ have emerged in the field.

²⁶ <https://sdgintegration.undp.org/knowledge-bank>

²⁷ <http://www.oecd.org/gov/pcsd/>

²⁸ <https://www.unpei.org/>

²⁹ <https://unemg.org/data-visualisations/>

³⁰ https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/24797GSDR_report_2019.pdf

³¹ <https://www.earthsystemgovernance.org/>

³² <https://globalgoalsproject.eu/>

³³ <https://council.science/actionplan/sdg-interactions/>

³⁴ For example: www.iisd.org ; www.sei.org ; www.wri.org

International development cooperation

Coherent policymaking has been revamped and strengthened in the [United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework](#) (UNSDCF). UNSDCF (2019) employs three mutually reinforcing modes of implementation: results-focused programming, capacity development and coherent policy support. The Cooperation Framework is “the most important instrument for planning and implementation of the UN development activities at country level in support of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda)”. Given the ambition of the 2030 Agenda and the urgency of its timeline, this resolution represents a significant shift. The Cooperation Framework now guides the entire programme cycle, driving planning, implementation, monitoring, reporting and evaluation of collective United Nations support for achieving the 2030 Agenda. It specifies, under Article 27, “Coherent policy support: The interlinked nature of the SDGs demands policy coherence and more integrated, cross-sectoral approaches. The UN development system must combine its diverse and complementary mandates, expertise and technical contributions so that it provides effective, comprehensive and coherent policy support to national partners. Policy coherence ensures consistency across national policy and programmatic frameworks, their alignment with development commitment and adherence to international law. Accordingly, Cooperation Frameworks (a) align to national priorities and plans, national SDG strategies and targets, and internationally and regionally agreed policy frameworks defining integrated approaches to sustainable development; (b) enhance synergies between intervention areas (horizontal coherence) and their alignment with national development goals; and (c) strengthen coherence among development, humanitarian and peacebuilding efforts and human rights mechanisms in relevant contexts for the realization and sustainability of peace and development gains.”

The Common Country Analysis, a required and essential element of every UNSDCF process, combines multiple perspectives to identify the national capacity gaps that can be addressed by coordinated United Nations support towards enhanced policy coherence.³⁵ United Nations Resident Coordinators play an enhanced role throughout the Cooperation Framework process, in line with General Assembly resolution 72/279 and the new Management and Accountability Framework (MAF).³⁶ The MAF contributes to policy coherence for sustainable development through connected and collective support generating common results and expanding whole-of-system expertise to countries.³⁷ For United Nations staff, [UN INFO](#) is an online planning, monitoring and reporting platform that digitizes each Cooperation Framework and its

³⁵ <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/common-country-analysis-undaf-companion-guidance>

³⁶ <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/management-and-accountability-framework-un-development-and-resident-coordinator-system>

³⁷ [A/72/707-S/2018/43:7](#)

corresponding joint workplans. It reflects the United Nations development system's effort to improve coherence, transparency and accountability.³⁸

UNDP has invested in integrated decision-making support,³⁹ and together with UNDESA they implement development projects in a range of countries to support the formulation of sustainable development policies considering the interactions and interdependencies in the areas of climate, land use, energy and water. MAPS (Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support) is the United Nations' common approach to support Member States in implementing the SDGs with an integrated approach. This can include integrated data analysis, forecasting, awareness raising and support for planning and programming. UNDP has supported 51 countries through MAPS engagements since 2016.

Regional Commissions

Each of the regional United Nations' economic commissions have taken initiatives in specific areas. For example, [UNESCAP](#) has a Regional Learning Platform on policy coherence for disaster risk reduction and resilience and a regional help desk. [UNECA](#) has been active in promoting and implementing projects of integrated quantitative analysis to address interlinkages between climate, land, energy and water systems in relation to the SDGs. [ECLAC](#) developed the Caribbean Development Portal to aggregate and compare development policies and strategies for the countries of the region. [UNECE](#) has tackled the lack of coherence and consistency in risk management regulatory frameworks and methodologies as they relate to SDG implementation. [UNESCWA](#) has established the Arab Center for Poverty Reduction and Social Policy to promote coherent and integrated growth in the region.

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³⁸ https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/UN-Cooperation-Framework-Internal-Guidance-Final-June-2019_1.pdf

³⁹ <https://sdgintegration.undp.org/integrated-solutions>