

A paradigm shift in addressing development issues

The policy coherence approach

Javier Pérez González, Belén Agüero



Illustrator: [Hansel Obando](#)

At the beginning of 2021 we officially entered the 'Decade of Action' which marks the remaining 10 years to meet the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) approved by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015. This year, the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) has published a new report urging action to prevent the climate crisis from reaching irreversible levels. This is all taking place in a context of social and economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, which has hit all countries and social classes, but which has had a particularly severe impact on the most vulnerable countries and groups. Now, while many are celebrating the beginning of a return to pre-pandemic normality, it is worth asking ourselves what kind of normality we want to (or should) return to. Perhaps it is time to stop trying to turn back the clock and start taking steps towards a new normality, one that is more sustainable, resilient and fair to all people in all regions of the world.

The reality is that no one knows exactly how to reach this new or different normality. Even though we know that there are no magic, easy or universally useful solutions, for the first time in history the international community has a common roadmap, which is compatible

with the ambition and transformative spirit necessary for a challenge of such a scale. In 2015, the 2030 Agenda was adopted (comprising the 17 SDGs but also the Paris Agreement, the New Urban Agenda, the Sendai Framework and the Samoa Pathway), which addresses all the major challenges facing humanity and which must be met if we are to achieve a new version of development that is no longer purely economically driven but sustainable, inclusive and fair.

However, more than five years after its adoption, many governments are still virtually at square one. Others are taking their first tentative steps, but have yet to grasp the profound social, economic and environmental transformations that the Agenda calls for and that are essential if we are to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

A paradigm shift focusing on human rights, gender equality and environmental sustainability: the policy coherence approach

The 2030 Agenda is not an easy challenge to meet. The first reason is that it sets out a series of goals and objectives linked to the fight against poverty and inequality, the promotion of sustainable economic development and the fight against the climate crisis; all objectives that require real and profound changes that sometimes go against the established *statu quo*. The second is that the Agenda is part of a complex global reality, in which multilateralism and international cooperation have been at their lowest point for decades. The final reason is that the 17 goals that comprise the Agenda form a complex web of interactions, which at times lead to tensions and contradictions between political objectives within the single plan of action. Its adoption and implementation require a detailed analysis of the context in which it will be implemented and a series of political and governance innovations in order to respond to multisectoral and multidimensional problems.

Faced with these difficulties, the international community is increasingly turning its attention to the policy coherence approach, a principle that has been implemented for decades in the field of international cooperation that is now resurfacing with renewed relevance in the context of the 2030 Agenda. Thus, 'Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development' (PCSD) has been included, target 17.14, as one of the means of implementation necessary to implement the Agenda and has been defined by the OECD as:

«[...] a procedure for integrating sustainable development dimensions into the national and international policy-making process. Its objectives in the context of the 2030 Agenda are to promote the integrated implementation of the 2030 Agenda through the following actions:

- (i) Foster synergies and maximise the profits across economic,

social and environmental policy areas;

(ii) Identify trade-offs and reconcile domestic policy objectives with internationally agreed Sustainable Development Goals; and

(iii) Address cross-border and long-term impacts of policies, including those likely to affect developing countries».

OCDE (2019) Council Recommendation on Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development, OECD Legal Instruments.

Policy Coherence for Development (PCD), the predecessor of PCSD, has been in place for almost 30 years, having been promoted within the EU as one of the '3 Cs' of the Maastricht Treaty (Coordination, Complementarity and Coherence) and legally enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty. The main difference between the two approaches is that PCD places a special focus on the external dimension of public policies, requiring that a country's development cooperation policy objectives be considered in the design of all its policies, both domestic and external, especially in areas that could affect developing countries. Within the framework of the 2030 Agenda, PCSD broadens this approach to include not only the external and developing country impacts of all public policies, but also the domestic impacts of policies in the social, economic and environmental spheres.

Policy coherence remains relevant in the framework of the 2030 Agenda, ensuring that the negative impacts of public policies in developing countries are reduced and do not negatively affect others

This broadening of the approach does not imply that the relevance of the 'old coherence' ceases to be relevant. The PCD remains relevant in the framework of the 2030 Agenda, ensuring that the negative impacts of public policies in developing countries are reduced and that policies put in place to adopt the SDGs in one country do not negatively affect or reduce the chances of implementing the SDGs in others.

The introduction of the 2030 Agenda has also led to a broadening of the scope, relevance and sphere of influence of development cooperation policy and actors. The Agenda calls for the coherent mainstreaming of human rights, gender equality and environmental sustainability, which have been the traditional guiding principles of development cooperation policy, into all public policies.

Political will and public innovation: essential ingredients for policy coherence

Implementing the policy coherence approach poses a challenge in and of itself. Achieving policy coherence requires a change in political culture, as it implies a series of profound reforms in the way policies are designed, implemented and evaluated. It is therefore important that it is seen not as a voluntary endeavour, but as a political and legal commitment that must be fulfilled. In many countries and regions across the world (including the EU, Spain and Catalonia), PCD is part of the legal system. It is also important to acknowledge the interconnected nature of public policies and the impact they have on other policies at the domestic level, but also beyond territorial borders.

Some authors maintain that implementing policy coherence is «more a political than a technical issue» [1], and that its proper implementation requires first and foremost political commitment at the highest level. This would make it possible to put in place a series of mechanisms to promote its implementation and its long-term acceptance by government bodies and officials.

The OECD has been working since the end of the last century to promote the implementation of the PCD approach. Since 2015, it has doubled its efforts by generating methodological tools to help governments implement this approach and carry out the necessary transformations. To this end, the OECD has identified a series of obstacles to be overcome and factors that need to be considered, especially when it comes to mainstreaming the dimensions of sustainable development throughout the public policy cycle. These challenges and factors can be summarised as follows:

- Political commitment and long-term vision. The changes to be undertaken are so deeply entrenched in the very culture of government and in the way policies are made that without a strong, real and explicit political commitment it will not be possible to implement them. The holistic view of reality in the short, medium and long term and of the interactions between policies requires that all areas of government must be equally implicated. Commitment to coherence has to be at the highest level, but it must also permeate all levels of administration.
- Understanding the positive and negative interactions between policies and incorporating them into the policy cycle. This is one of the biggest challenges in implementing the policy coherence approach. It requires an initial in-depth analysis of the relationships between all the policies of an administration, based on the three dimensions of development and adding a fourth dimension related to governance. It also requires understanding the synergies and tensions that are created between these policies and the positive and negative impacts they have, both in the present and in the long term, at the domestic and international levels, as well as from a multilevel perspective. Carrying out this analysis and implementing a public policy process that takes all these dimensions into account requires breaking down the thematic and administrative silos. This is the basis of traditional public policy,

together with the implementation of cross-cutting work methodologies, coordination and co-creation.

- Institutional and governance mechanisms. Identifying interactions and designing methodologies to address these interactions is key, but so is defining those institutional and governance mechanisms that will enable the sustainability of this new model in the long term. This does not necessarily imply the creation of new channels or structures, but rather a critical analysis of the existing ones and, most likely, a reform process of these mechanisms to enable them to deal with the tensions that will arise between public policies. These tensions will not only occur at the horizontal level between areas of government, but also at the vertical level between levels of administration and at the multi-stakeholder level where stakeholders could see their interests affected. These mechanisms must be defined in a transparent manner and through participatory processes where all voices can be heard.
- Participation is a key issue that is reinforced by the policy coherence approach. It is necessary to include the voices of the different stakeholders, not only in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies, but also in the analysis of interactions and the development of methodologies to address these interactions, as well as in the definition of coordination and communication mechanisms that allow the management of these interactions in the public policy process.
- Monitoring, evaluation and accountability. The generation of data and evidence on the impacts of policies is key to be able to properly monitor the implementation processes and carry out critical analyses of what works and what does not work in the adoption of the SDGs. Measurable indicators that consider the most vulnerable populations and groups must be defined to ensure that the information generated allows us to draw conclusions about how policies affect each group, especially the most vulnerable. Once the data is available, evaluations should be based on the principle of leaving no one behind and producing recommendations that can then be addressed when the policy cycle restarts. This should be accompanied by public accountability processes where all relevant actors can offer their views and feedback into the analysis, thereby promoting continuous learning.

Progress and challenges in implementing the policy coherence approach: what is being done and what remains to be done?

Perhaps weighed down by the theoretical complexity of implementing the policy coherence approach, the actual implementation of the approach among governments across the world is, at best, only partly satisfactory.

Each recent experience of implementing policy coherence emphasises a specific aspect,

determined by the country's own context and political background, but also by the ambition and commitment of the different governments to make the necessary changes to promote sustainable development. There are initiatives such as that of the Czech Republic, that has involved all areas of government in the planning and policy design processes through the creation of coordinating bodies with high-level decision-makers and has placed the Secretariat for Sustainable Development within the Government Office. Other countries, such as Sweden and Finland, have decided to mainstream the 2030 Agenda by putting social justice, the alignment of domestic and international policies and the consideration of environmental issues at the centre of the public policy cycle. Finland is mainstreaming environmental issues in its budgets by taking into account the budgetary implications of climate measures, R&D&I for clean technologies and sustainable public procurement. Sweden has aligned its policies with the 2030 Agenda with a focus on promoting social justice.

The European Commission, for its part, has been promoting policy coherence for development for decades, through the obligation to assess the impact on developing countries of any new legislative or regulatory proposal. Such assessments must consider cross-border effects before, during and after the implementation of the policy or legislative act in question. A specific methodology and tool have been developed for this purpose. Several Commission services are involved in the evaluation and the quality of the entire process is audited by a supervisory body.

Progress within Spain is also varied. At the state level, in mid-2021 the Sustainable Development Strategy was approved, which defines eight structural national challenges that Spain intends to address in order to achieve sustainable development, accompanied by an Integrated Policy Coherence System, which is currently in the definition phase.

In the case of Catalonia, there are many noteworthy processes, not only those being implemented by the Government of Catalonia itself, but also by local Catalan authorities. At the Autonomous Community level, there is the National Plan for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, which defined a series of government commitments for the implementation of the SDGs and is in the process of being updated following the change of government resulting from the elections at the beginning of 2021. One of the commitments that has been defined is that of 'advancing policy coherence for development that links all government activity with sustainable development', which was originally the responsibility of the Department of Foreign Action, Institutional Relations and Transparency.

This Plan stands out for the participatory process carried out under the coordination of the Advisory Council for the Sustainable Development (CADS), which consisted of encouraging all the departments of the Government of Catalonia to be aware of the relationship of their mandate with the 2030 Agenda. All the commitments promoted were negotiated between the departments to start working from a cross-cutting work perspective, which led to the identification of overlaps, synergies and tensions between areas or even within the same area. In line with these commitments is the Catalan Master Plan for Development Cooperation, which sets out the role of cooperation in implementing PCSD and defines a series of actions, including the creation of the Catalan centre for business and human rights

and the development of a roadmap for the implementation of policy coherence, focused on detecting and addressing the external impact of public policies. This work is currently in progress, awaiting the new government provide the final impetus it needs to move from political commitments to actual policies.

Implementing the necessary processes to meet the targets of the 17 SDGs require multidimensional and complex solutions

These advances are being complemented by those being made at the level of the provincial councils and local bodies, such as those promoted by the Barcelona Provincial Council through training local government officials in PCD and technical support to local councils for the implementation of the coherence approach in their public policies and administrative procedures. The Barcelona Metropolitan Area has also decided to promote policy coherence in its new Master Plan, especially in terms of education for global citizenship.

Conclusions

Tackling the great common challenges of our era and doing so by integrating economic, social and environmental considerations and intergenerational and cross-border visions is no easy task, and even less so now, in a post-pandemic context. The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs represent one of the most ambitious proposals ever agreed by the international community to address these challenges. Although imperfect and in some areas lacking the necessary ambition, the 2030 Agenda is, thus far, the only proposal that provides a comprehensive vision for sustainable development and that engages governments at all levels of administration and at all levels of development.

However, consensus and widespread acceptance of the Agenda are not enough. Implementing the necessary processes to meet the targets of the 17 SDGs requires profound changes within the administrations themselves; changes that sometimes challenge long-standing inertia and privileges. The ways of doing politics that have served us well until now are becoming obsolete in the face of the multidimensionality and complexity of the challenges we face, which require the promotion of equally multidimensional and complex solutions. Policy coherence represents an innovative proposal to mobilise these necessary changes in public administration, offering a different way of making policies that is centred on cross-cutting and multi-stakeholder participation as the basis for the design, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and accountability of the public policies needed to achieve fairer, more sustainable and inclusive societies.

REFERENCES

- 1 — Ronceray, M. (2020) What We Can Learn from Europe's Record on Policy Coherence for the SDGs. *SDG Knowledge Hub* [[Available online](#)].

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barrero, A., Amayuelas, A., Viladevall, L. (2021) *Más ambición por favor*. Madrid: Futuro en Común [[Available online](#)].

European Commission (2019) 2019 EU report on Policy Coherence for Development, *Comission Staff Working Document*. Brussel·les: European Comission [[Available online](#)].

Futuro en Común (2020) *La coherencia de políticas en el corazón de la transición a la sostenibilidad*. Madrid: Futuro en Común [[Available online](#)].

Gómez-Escolar, P., Gonzalez, M. (2021) Podar con coherencia para cosechar mejores frutos. *El País* [[Available online](#)].

Mackie, J. (2020) Promoting policy coherence: Lessons learned in EU development cooperation, *Policy Brief*, September 2020. Maastricht: ECDPM [[Available online](#)].

OECD (2018) Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development Toolkit [[Available online](#)].

OECD (2019) *Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development 2019: Empowering People and Ensuring Inclusiveness and Equality*. Paris: OECD Publishing [[Available online](#)].

OECD (2019) *Governance as an SDG Accelerator: Country Experiences and Tools*. Paris: OECD Publishing [[Available online](#)].

OCDE (2019) Recomendación del Consejo sobre coherencia de las políticas para el desarrollo sostenible, *Instrumentos jurídicos de la OCDE*. Paris: OECD Publishing [[Available online](#)].

Ronceray, M. (2020) What We Can Learn from Europe's Record on Policy Coherence for the SDGs. *SDG Knowledge Hub* [[Available online](#)].

Swedish Ministry of the Environment (2003) A Swedish Strategy for Sustainable Development Swedish, *Government Communication* 2003/04:129 [[Available online](#)].



Javier Pérez González

Javier Pérez González holds a degree in Law and a degree in Economics from the Carlos III University of Madrid. He also holds a Postgraduate in Technologies for Human Development from the Open University of Catalonia (UOC). Founding partner of the Laboratorio de Estudios para el Desarrollo (LED), from 2006 to 2011 he worked in the Studies Area of Oxfam Intermón, where he coordinated Oxfam International's research agenda in the areas of Trade, Agriculture and Climate Change. Since 2011 he has directed the Centre for Research and Studies on Coherence and Development (Political Watch). His main areas of expertise are policy coherence, international trade policy, business and human rights and the use of technology for the promotion of accountability, oversight and citizen participation.

**Belén Agüero**

M. Belén Agüero holds a degree in International Relations from the Catholic University of Salta in Argentina and a Master's degree in International Cooperation and Management of Public Policies, Programmes and Development Projects from the Menéndez Pelayo International University in alliance with the Ortega y Gasset University Research Institute. She has experience in cooperation consultancy and public policy analysis in the area of ex-ante and post evaluation of decentralised development cooperation projects. In addition to this, she has experience in research consultancy and the analysis of development policies, working for both Spanish and international institutions. Her areas of specialisation are policy coherence, decentralised cooperation, the 2030 Agenda and the use of technology for the promotion of accountability and monitoring. Currently she works as a researcher at Political Watch and collaborates with the Institute for International Cooperation and Municipal Development (INCIDEM) communication area.