The 2030 Agenda and coherent national development policy: In dialogue with South African policymakers on Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development

Vandudzai Mbanda and Willem Fourie

Department of Business Management, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

***Correspondence**
Willem Fourie, Department of Business Management, University of Pretoria, 0002 Pretoria, South Africa.
Email: willem.fourie@up.ac.za

Abstract

The Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD) agenda is regarded as the principal instrument to ensure the coherent alignment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with domestic policies. Due to PCSD's genesis in the foreign aid donor–recipient relationship, there is a shortage of research on policymakers in developing countries' perspective on PCSD. In this article, interviews with South African policymakers are used to evaluate the applicability of PCSD beyond the donor–recipient relationship critically. Emphasis is placed on vertical coherence. Policymakers are found to emphasise (a) the need to prioritise the SDGs' targets in terms of national priorities, (b) the importance of attending to institutional issues such as a lack of accountability and efficiency, (c) addressing the skills mismatch of capacity development interventions, and (d) engaging party politics.

KEYWORDS: 2030 Agenda, policy, policymakers, policy coherence, Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs, South Africa

Abbreviations: SDG - Sustainable Development Goal.

1 INTRODUCTION

United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes “policy coherence” as a systemic requirement for the realisation of the SDGs. Intuitively, policymakers in developing and developed countries would agree that policy coherence is essential. Less obvious, however, is how to create coherent policies aligned with the SDGs.

The 2030 Agenda's reference to Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development can be seen as the culmination of a decades-long process. In the wake of “comprehensive planning” in the 1960s, “integrated planning” in the 1970s, “structural adjustment” in the 1980s, and programmes for even more rigorous political reform in the 1990s, the 1990s also saw the emergence of the notion of “policy coherence for development” (PCD; Carbone, 2008: p. 329). Even though significantly less was expected of PCD than the case was for the approaches to development mentioned above, PCD did provide the basis for the principle of policy coherence being included in the European Union's Maastricht Treaty in 1992 (European Union, 2019).

Since 1992, the notion of policy coherence, or policy coherence for development was taken up mainly by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). In developing countries, systematic reflection on policy coherence for development largely remained a topic constrained to the donor–recipient relationship and driven by providers of foreign aid (Knoll, 2014). The 2030 Agenda, and with it the transformation of the PCD movement into Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD), provides a platform to apply and refine policy coherence principles beyond the donor–recipient relationship, particularly in developing countries. According to OECD (2018), many countries already have the essential building blocks for a PCSD system for implementing SDGs, but it is the alignment with the nature and principles of the 2030 Agenda that requires strengthening.

This article contributes to the shortage of literature on this topic by collecting and interpreting South African policymakers' views on the potential of the SDGs to foster policy coherence. The aims are to identify South African policymakers' views on the policy coherence requirements implied by the SDGs and to gauge the extent to which PCSD responds to these requirements. The article focuses primarily on vertical policy coherence.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Curran, Dougill, Pardoe, and Vincent (2018) acknowledges that accomplishing policy coherence is challenging for many countries in sub-Saharan Africa. This challenge is compounded by the fact that there is no single way of ensuring policy coherence given the numerous different country contexts and institutional structures (Curran et al., 2018). Furthermore, Cloete (2018) believes that the stated goals of cooperation and policy coherence in South Africa are mostly rhetoric, given the limited progress made towards their attainment. As an example, Cloete (2018) cites the SDG Baseline Report for South Africa that was being compiled by various government departments together with international agencies and civil society under the lead of Statistics South Africa. The Baseline Report was completed as an internal Statistics South Africa endeavour, and external stakeholders are believed to have lost interest towards the end of the report-drafting process (Cloete, 2018).

In this section, literature that highlights the theoretical underpinnings of the policy coherence for development “movement” will be discussed to ultimately connect this rather theoretical discourse with the concrete challenges of policy coherence in the SDG era in South Africa. We start by sketching the genesis of PCD and its evolution to PCSD.

2.1 From PCD to PCSD

To appreciate the critical tenets of PCSD, one should take note of its genesis—notably the relatively slow process of mainstreaming the principle of policy coherence in the OECD and beyond. According to Cecilia Gregersen and her colleagues' analysis (Gregersen, Mackie, & Torres, 2016: 13), the 1990s mostly saw debates within Europe on the principle of policy coherence. In the early 2000s, the OECD Development Assistance Committee's peer review system started to include PCD for the first time, reflecting donor countries' increasing interest in the principle. This was followed by growing attention to PCD, and a high-level commitment to the principle in the European Consensus on Development (2006). In this document, the European Union (EU) commits to ensuring that “non-development policies assist developing countries” efforts in achieving the MDGs' (EU, 2006: p. 22). In 2007, the publication of a regular EU PCD report commenced, and shortly after that, the European Parliament created the position of a Standing Rapporteur for PCD. PCD's definition

eventually solidified into four dimensions: coherence between providers of development assistance's aid policies; coherence between aid and nonaid policies; coherence between the policies of providers of development assistance within recipient countries; and coherence between the policies of providers and recipients of development assistance (Picciotto, 2005: p. 312).

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development saw the emphasis change from PCD to Policy Coherence for *Sustainable* Development (PCSD). This change signalled more than only changing semantics. Drawing on the ambitious, integrated, long-term, and indivisible nature of the 2030 Agenda's SDGs, PCSD is a significantly more complex agenda than PCD. The five levels on which PCSD seeks to create coherence illustrates the difference in complexity and ambition between PCSD and PCD (Gregersen et al., 2016: 16). On the first level, PCSD seeks to create coherence between different international agendas. A case in point is the search for coherence between the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement. On a second level, PCSD focuses on coherence between these international agendas and national development priorities. This is particularly relevant in Africa, where many countries, including South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria, have their own long-term national development goals. Thirdly, in addition to the search for "vertical"coherence, PCSD also seeks to foster horizontal coherence. This means that countries are supported to ensure coherence between economic, social, and environmental policies. The last two levels on which PCSD seeks to create coherence has to do with the means of implementing ambitious international and national development goals. On a fourth level, coherence between different sources of finance is sought. And on the fifth level, PCSD focuses on coherence between various actors within a particular country.

How should countries go about implementing this complex PCSD programme? James Mackie and colleagues argue that countries need to draw on lessons learned from other programmes that sought to create coherent policies. In addition to PCD, it should also include whole-of-government approaches, policy nexus approaches, and issue-based mainstreaming approaches (Mackie, Ronceray, & Spierings, 2017: pp. 29–30). They identify a list of good practices, ranging from accepting that complete coherence is impossible and starting with high-impact sectors, to ensuring political buy-in and identifying "policy entrepreneurs."

In their proposal for implementing PCSD, Måns Nilsson and Åsa Persson draw on lessons learned from environmental policy integration (EPI; Nilsson & Persson, 2017: pp. 37–38). According to these authors, the SDGs are, just like EPI, a normative framework. At the core lies global partnership that takes joint responsibility for shared problems. To this, one can add the normative motivation encapsulated by the slogan "leave no one behind." This is essentially a call for distributive justice, ensuring that those "furthest behind" are "reached first."

Political will is needed to realise these goals. The authors helpfully address the question "political will *for what*?." It is not merely about general political support for the global agenda. The SDG require high-level support to "interpret" the goals domestically and to localise the goals in terms of national policies. Based on the EPI experience, the authors provide a nuanced proposal for the institutional arrangements necessary for realising the SDGs. They refute the notion that the "silos" in which line departments and experts operate are the main impediments to the SDGs' realisation. The SDGs require specialist expertise, and such expertise is cultivated in institutional arrangements that resemble silos. Of greater importance is improving communication and collaboration across functional areas.

When considering the complexity of PCSD vis-à-vis PCD, the challenge of tracking progress of countries that try to implement this ambitious programme is the last topic that merits attention. Building on the OECD's PCSD framework document, Ernest Morales and Carina Lindberg propose focussing on three elements: institutional mechanisms, policy interactions, and policy effects (Morales & Lindberg, 2017: p. 2). The first two elements cover topics mostly included in PCD: political commitment, coordination mechanisms, monitoring and evaluation systems, policy objectives, and outcomes. The third element, however, illustrates the ambition of PCSD. Policies' effects on current wellbeing, their transboundary effects, as well as their effect on future generations' wellbeing should be factored in.

As argued by Fourie, the literature on both PCD and PCSD shows a bias towards considering policy coherence from the perspective of developed, mostly OECD countries (Fourie, 2018). The 2030 Agenda in general and PCSD, in particular, require going beyond the provider–recipient framework and reflecting on policy coherence from the perspective of developing countries themselves. However, not many studies of this nature exist. Matthew England and colleagues' article on cross-sectoral policy coherence in Malawi, Tanzania, and Zambia is one of the few exceptions (England et al., 2018). Their analysis of policies in these three countries confirms Nilsson and Persson's finding that the creation of cross-sectoral structures with political support, such as Zambia's Interim Climate Change Secretariat, is vital for policy coherence.

2.2 Case studies of PCSD implementation

Lack of public officials, parliamentarians, and citizens' understanding of the PCSD concept and its implications are argued to be the main obstacles to the implementation of the PCSD principle (OECD, 2019a). Even though responsibilities for enhancing PCSD should differ in developed and developing countries because of the vast differences in their capacities and their stages of development, OECD (2015) argues that developed countries have more significant responsibility because they have more experience and greater financing capacity.

To enhance PCSD at the regional level in Catalonia, a Spanish development think tank the *Centro de Investigación y Estudios sobre Comercio y Desarrollo* (CIECODE) advised the regional government in elaborating an introductory PCSD Guide for public officials as well as capacity building across departments during the development of first action plan on PCSD (OECD, 2019a). The CIECODE was given a contract for designing and coordinating training for public officials.

In Ecuador, Escuela Superior Politecnica del Litoral's Center for Public Policy Development is said to be a leading player in the promotion of PCSD in public policymaking and planning in the country (OECD, 2019a). This has been done through knowledge and capacity building about PCSD in the country as well as promoting PCSD dialogue with critical stakeholders. PCSD knowledge and capacity is built through active participation in a PCSD online course offered by the United Nations System Staff College and becoming more familiar with international PCSD tools (OECD, 2019a).

PCSD is promoted by a platform of non-governmental organisations called Slovenian Global Action. Multi-stakeholder cooperation is believed to have been strengthened through the efforts of civil society in strengthening PCSD (OECD, 2019a).

3 METHODOLOGY

The 2030 Agenda conclusively broadened the scope of policy coherence beyond the provider–recipient relationship. Developing countries can use their domestic medium- and long-term policies as a point of reference for fostering coherence. The adoption of the 2030 Agenda also saw PCD transform into PCSD—a more complex and ambitious framework for creating policy coherence.

Zeigermann (2018) points out that, although there is no agreed definition of PCSD, the concept entails requiring PCSD itself to be an overarching policy goal to promote positive synergies and ensuring that there are no incoherencies across various sectoral policies. PCSD involves mainstreaming the promotion of sustainable development across all spheres of national governments, all sectors and levels of public decision making, as well as international organisations (Zeigermann, 2018). According to the OECD (2019b), p. 1), PCSD is "an approach and policy tool that supports the integration of the economic, social, environmental and governance dimensions of sustainable development across all stages of policymaking, facilitating integrated approaches to proposed solutions for the SDGs." In this study, the working definition of PCSD relates to vertical policy coherence in South Africa.

This article contributes to the body of knowledge on policy coherence by adding to the literature on PCSD in developing countries. In distinction to other studies on policy coherence in developing countries, this article goes beyond a qualitative analysis of existing policies. It does so by using interviews with South African policymakers as a primary source of information. Interviews were focussed on gaining policymakers' insights on the extent to which the SDGs can either foster or impede policy coherence. We interviewed policymakers to answer the following inductive research questions: what are South African policymakers' viewing as barriers to coherent policymaking in the era of the 2030 Agenda? How do their views relate to existing theory developed by proponents of Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development?

Respondents were asked to contextualise their responsive in terms of policy incoherence that existed before the adoption of the 2030 Agenda. This information is used to discuss the responsiveness of PCSD to the needs expressed by South African policymakers.

Due to the study's focus on vertical incoherence, only national government departments with a cross-sectoral coordination role were included in the sample. Altogether, 11 departments were approached. They are The Presidency, the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME), the Department of Environmental Affairs, the Department of International Relations and Cooperation, the Department of Trade and Industry, National Treasury, the Department of Small Business Development, the Department of Science and Technology, the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, the Department of Women, and the Department of Higher Education and Training. Interviews were conducted with nine representatives from five departments. Two departments requested group interviews, during which more than one representative from the respective department attended and contributed to the interview. In one case, two representatives from the same department availed themselves for two separate interviews. Due to the anonymity guaranteed to each participant, as well as the guarantee that participating departments' contributions would not be ascribed to the respective department, participating departments will not be identified.

To contextualise feedback from government respondents, interviews with representatives from development partners and civil society organisations were also conducted. These interviews were used as supplementary material to provide further context to the information provided by government respondents. Staff members working on matters related to South Africa's development at the embassies of South Africa's seven most important European development partners were contacted. “Importance” was determined by the official development assistance disbursed to South Africa. Interviews with six people from four missions were conducted. They are the European Union Delegation to South Africa, the German Embassy, the Danish Embassy, and the Irish Embassy. Altogether, 11 of the large development-focussed civil society organisations were contacted, and interviews with three representatives were conducted. Their organisations are the Foundation for Human Rights, Bridge, and enke.

In each national government department, the office of the Director-General was requested to identify respondents. In the interview request, technical knowledge of the 2030 Agenda was highlighted as a critical requirement. We had, however, no guarantee that the identified respondents would, in fact, be knowledgeable on either the 2030 Agenda or the notion of policy coherence. This route was taken due to three reasons. First, not all departments have staff dedicated to matters related to the 2030 Agenda. Even in those where specific staff members are dedicated to the 2030 Agenda, departments use different descriptions for the positions. Second, most departments do not make the contact details of relevant staff members available online. Third, working through the office of the Director-General was deemed politically prudent, as this route means he/she is aware of the project and in principle supportive of staff members' participation. In our view, routing the request for participation through the office of the Director-General would not bias the results, as representatives were not expected to provide privileged information. Knowing that the Director-General supports their involvement is likely to make participants more rather than less responsive.

During the interviews, it was made clear that respondents were not expected to speak on behalf of their respective department. Respondents were invited to draw on their technical knowledge to reflect on the challenge of coordination. In line with the university's policies on ethical research, ethics clearance was obtained before conducting interviews, and respondents were informed that their input will be used to identify trends and will not be attributed to either them as individuals or to their departments.

The most significant challenge experienced during interviews was relatively low levels of awareness of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. This was surprising, as Directors-General were requested to identify respondents with knowledge on this topic. Respondents were relatively informed and opinionated concerning global development politics as such but did not reveal detailed insight into SDG targets relevant to their particular department. This is as least partly due to the fact that, at the time of the interviews, South Africa has not yet released its first progress report on the SDGs, which in turn was a reflection of the slow political uptake of the agenda in South Africa. A second challenge experienced during the interviews was the inability of many interviews to articulate ways in which policy incoherence manifests itself and how coherence could be improved. Interviews invariably gravitated towards sector-specific topics or initiatives. A third last relates to the time available to interview senior representatives from participating departments. In cases where time constraints were severe, the emphasis was placed on questions explicitly related to policy coherence, excluding introductory questions (1a and 1b).

The semi-structured interviews focussed on two sets of questions. The first concentrated on existing developmental and co-ordination challenges in South Africa (2a and 2b). The second set centred on the potential of the 2030 Agenda to either foster or impede policy coherence (3a and 3b). As neither PCD nor PCSD has entered mainstream policy discussions in South Africa, interviews focussed more generally on the notion of "policy coherence." In cases where respondents were perceived to be less forthcoming, additional probing questions were asked (4a and 4b). The questions that were asked can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Interview questions

Question number	Question text
1a	What are the priorities of your department/institution? Why?
1b	What do you view as the most significant successes and failures of your department/institution during the past 10 years?
2a	Some analysts would say that South Africa has the potential to improve its development trajectory. If you agree, what should be done?
2b	Like all middle-income countries, South Africa also faces daunting challenges. If you agree, what are the key challenges?
3a	Policy coherence, or the extent to which policies within and across government departments are aligned, is central to an effective government planning system. What do you think could be done to improve policy coherence?
3b	Do you think the SDGs have the potential to enhance or weaken policy coherence? Why?
4a	What are the greatest strengths of your department/institution?
4b	What are the most significant weaknesses of your department/institution?

Table 2. Clustering of topics and subtopics

Topic cluster	Subtopics
Weak policy-making environment	The disconnect between national policy and provincial delivery; inadequate vertical coherence between national, provincial, and local policies and policy implementation; all sectors weak at policy delivery points; lack of systematic approach to create coherent policies
Ineffective political leadership	Lack of effective political leadership; political interference in some sectors; political leaders prioritise "low-hanging fruit" for political gain; paralysis brought about by political uncertainty; the need for political leadership
Capacity deficiencies	Inadequate in-service training; on the job training in government mismatched with skills needed; inadequate participation of the private sector; low-level technical capacity lacking in some government departments, for example, issuing licenses
Institutional issues	Lack of efficiency in government departments; lack of accountability, especially in municipalities; weakened institutions; persistence of apartheid institutional legacy
Economic constraints	Inadequate funding; stagnant economic growth; conflicting economic ideologies in government
Lack of focus and relevance of SDGs	Too broad; disconnected from National Development Plan; too "big" and all-encompassing; the danger of being only 'statistical' or 'reporting' exercise; not responsive to dynamics of developing world; lack of prioritisation
Instrumental use of the SDGs	SDGs as a vehicle to implement national policies; a global mechanism for domestic accountability; an instrument to attract external funding; vocabulary for multilateral dialogue

An inductive and qualitative data analysis methodology was followed. In the first step, interview notes were used to identify topics discussed during interviews. In the second step, topics that emerged during interviews were clustered together per interview. In the third step, clustered topics were compared across interviews to identify cross-cutting clusters. Table 2 shows the clustering of topics and subtopics.

4 FINDINGS

Respondents cited a *weak policymaking environment* as a cross-cutting disabler. This includes both what some respondents referred to as policies that are not "good enough" and the poor delivery of policies. According to some government respondents, "all sectors" are "very poor" at points of policy delivery. Respondents also highlighted a "disconnect between national policy and provincial delivery" and a "lack of a systematic approach to create coherent policies." Interestingly, not all respondents cited a complete absence of a systematic approach to coherent policies as a theme. Other respondents highlighted and strongly supported the introduction of the government's Socio-Economic Impact Assessment System (SEIAS; DPME, 2015).

A 2015 decision by the South African government's Cabinet established SEIAS. This required an impact assessment should be done of all draft national policies, bills, and regulations. These impact assessments should minimise unintended consequences, notably unnecessary costs, and should anticipate implementation risks. The impact assessment is done with reference to four national priorities: social cohesion and security (including food, energy, and financial security), economic inclusion, economic growth, and environmental sustainability. SEIAS applies to primary legislation, "subordinate legislation" that could have a significant impact on society, "significant" regulations, legislation and policy proposals, and "major amendments" to existing legislation, regulations, and policies. Despite the potential of SEIAS to contribute to policy coherence, respondents provided little evidence of SEIAS's positive impact—which, admittedly, could be difficult to ascertain.

Weaknesses in the policy environment are perceived to be exacerbated by ineffective political leadership, institutional issues, and capacity deficiencies. *Ineffective political leadership* is seen to comprise of a mix of a lack of strong leadership and perceived political interference in some respects. A broader context of political uncertainty and political principals' possibly understandable focus on "low-hanging fruit" could be viewed as one explanation for ineffective political leadership. Respondents did not reflect on how strong political leadership is perceived to be different from political interference.

Institutional issues focussed mostly on two topics. First, respondents perceived a lack of efficiency—particularly on the level of local government. In many cases, respondents referred to the effective functioning of national governments but weak delivery on provincial and local levels. The second institutional issue that surfaced was a perceived lack of accountability. Again, this was perceived to be particularly prevalent on local levels.

Capacity deficiencies were highlighted as another issue. Most of the discussions on capacity deficiencies centred on inadequate in-service training for policy-makers. One group of respondents defined the "inadequacy" of the in-service training as the "mismatch" between the skills needed and those being transferred by existing in-service training courses. Another respondent cited the weak participation of the private sector in South Africa's education and training system in general as one reason for the "skills mismatch."

All respondents linked one or more of the weaknesses highlighted above to South Africa's perceived *substandard education system.* Some respondents went as far as to call the system a "mess," whereas others intimated that it should be allowed to "break down" before attempting to improve the system. Other respondents referred to the low rate of return on the

education system. South Africa outspends other upper-middle-income countries on education, yet the taxpayer is not perceived to be receiving “value for money.”

Respondents were uncertain about the reasons for the education system's perceived low quality. In some cases, the legacies of apartheid, and specifically the fact that a large proportion of South Africa's primary school learners do not learn in their mother language was cited. Some respondents coupled this state of affairs with the low quality of teaching in South Africa's impoverished areas. This is also a function of well-trained teachers not being interested in living and working in such areas. Other respondents cited inadequate infrastructure and the perceived unconstructive role of teachers' trade unions.

When turning to the SDGs, it was noticeable that most government respondents expressed *qualified support for the SDGs.* In many interviews, South Africa's role in the negotiation process was cited as proof that the SDGs and national development priorities, notably the National Development Plan (NDP), can be reconciled relatively easily. When probed, however, few, if any, of the respondents were able to concretise either what role South Africa played during negotiations or in which sense the NDP and the SDGs are aligned. It would seem as if South Africa's role during the negotiations provides a political motivation for localising the SDGs in South Africa.

Most respondents seemed to argue for an *instrumental use of the SDGs.* The SDGs seem to be regarded as means to reach domestic ends. The dominant narrative was that the SDGs should be used as a vehicle to implement the NDP, specifically by building “relevant skills” to foster “inclusive growth.” The NDP was also viewed as more responsive to human rights issues than the SDGs. In many cases, the SDGs were considered as an instrument for attracting funding from beyond South Africa.

In some cases, the SDGs were viewed as the vocabulary for bilateral and multilateral dialogue on development. In a similar vein, the SDGs were viewed by some as an instrument for international accountability. One respondent proposed using the SDGs to keep South Africa accountable for realising its NDP. A few respondents recommended that the SDGs should be used to make the multilateral system more inclusive and, in this way, promote the interests of developing countries.

Other respondents viewed the SDGs primarily as a reporting framework. In some cases, the notion of the SDGs as a reporting framework was expanded to consider the SDGs a set of benchmarks that could eventually function as an international accountability tool.

Respondents' criticism of the SDGs centred on the *SDGs' lack of focus.* This was expressed in a range of ways, including referring to the SDGs as “too broad” and “too big” with “too many goals and targets.” One respondent called the SDGs' lack of focus “absurd,” whereas another raised that there is a risk that the SDGs might impede domestic policy coherence. The high likelihood that the SDGs will be viewed as merely a reporting exercise was also raised.

When focussing specifically on the notion of policy coherence, most government respondents highlighted the challenges of inadequate policy coherence, emphasising a lack of vertical coherence between national, provincial, and local spheres of government. In some cases, the sheer number of ministries was cited as an impediment to policy coherence. At the time of conducting interviews, South Africa had 34 ministers and 35 deputy ministers.

This is despite rather extensive efforts aimed at fostering coherence—which was also raised by a large proportion of the respondents—respondents further referred to the practice of establishing "government clusters" to support policy coherence. Such clusters are groupings of government departments with related cross-cutting programmes. Regular meetings between high-level representatives from clusters are aimed at ensuring policy coordination on national and provincial levels. Interministerial committees similarly consider cross-cutting issues and their unintended consequences.

5 DISCUSSION

We were ultimately interested in understanding the extent to which PCSD responds to policymakers' perception of coherence requirements created by the SDGs. Our analysis revealed three elements.

First, all respondents placed a strong emphasis on creating coherence between the SDGs and the overarching national planning agenda, the NDP. This requires, first, using the NDP–and not the SDGs—as the point of reference. According to the majority of respondents, the NDP has more political buy-in and responds better to South Africa's perceived unique set of developmental challenges. The SDGs, according to these respondents, are at best to be seen as the vehicle to advance the NDP. This means, second, that the NDP needs to be used to identify "priority" SDG targets. This is arguably one of the most controversial findings. Rather than emphasising the "indivisible" and "integrated" nature of the SDGs, respondents contested the idea that all the SDGs' targets are equally important and that all the targets should be realised in South Africa. Instead, respondents strongly recommended that a cluster of priority targets should be identified, and effort should be directed at realising these targets.

Unsurprisingly, and in accordance with the 2030 Agenda itself, PCSD does not seem to leave room for prioritising countries' implementation of the SDGs. Whereas acknowledging that experiences with National Sustainable Development Strategies highlighted the difficulty of integrating the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, the notion of priority-setting is not mentioned (OECD, 2017: p. 25). Interestingly, this is different from approaches followed in the private sector, notably the *SDG Compass* of the Global Reporting Initiative (n.d.), United Nations Global Compact, and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development. These actors explicitly advise companies to "identify impact areas" and "define priorities" as related to the SDGs (GRI, WBCSD and UN Global Compact, 2019).

Second, respondents established a connection between policy coherence and institutional issues. It emerged that South Africa has numerous, often innovative, programmes in place to foster policy coherence. As discussed above, SEIAS is the prime example thereof. Over and above SEIAS, South Africa has a government department—the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation—which is located in the Presidency and tasked with creating a more coherent national policy environment. Based on feedback received from respondents, it would seem as if institutional issues such as a lack of accountability and a lack of efficiency in government departments are impeding the effectiveness of existing measures aimed at ensuring coherent policies. Put differently: based on respondents' feedback, it would seem as if better policy coherence depends on more effective government departments and better systems of accountability.

Third, respondents problematise the conventional focus on the need for political commitment. Respondents consistently insisted that political buy-in on a national level does not necessarily lead to political buy-in and implementation on provincial and local levels. In fact, respondents focussed on capacity development initiatives on two levels.

On the first level, the knowledge gaps related to the policy coherence amongst political principals should be addressed. This precedes any attempt at gaining political buy-in. A base level of capacity to appreciate the policy coherence requirements implied by the SDGs is a prerequisite for a meaningful political commitment on national, provincial, and local levels. Capacity development, used in this sense, could be nothing more than base-level training on policy coherence and the SDGs. The simplicity of the intervention should not obscure the need for focussed capacity development interventions. To "activate" political commitment, additional capacity development is required. In its current format, PCSD does not make explicit connections between political commitment and capacity building (OECD, 2017: pp. 22–25).

On a second level, the skills mismatch amongst policy-makers tasked with driving policy coherence should be addressed. In numerous interviews, the "irrelevance" of existing training interventions was highlighted. These interventions are perceived to be out of touch with the lived experience of policy-makers. This also seems to be the case for the tertiary training policy-makers receive prior to entering the public service and their induction course into the public service. A needs-based approach to developing capacity development interventions, particularly those aimed at foster policy coherence, is one way of addressing this mismatch.

A *fourth* under-researched finding that emerged was the need to incorporate party politics into the processes aimed at fostering policy coherence. Respondents pointed towards the fact that, in South Africa, high-level policy priorities are a function of the electoral mandate of the ruling party. This mandate is again the result of the ruling party's leadership and elective conferences. In order to unlock the potential of the SDGs to create more coherent policies, they need to be reflected upon in the policy priorities of the main political parties. This is particularly pertinent for the context in which interviews were conducted, as political parties were preparing for the five-yearly national election.

The potential impact of engaging party politics is entirely missing in all PCSD documentation reviewed for this article. This may be a function of the perceived stability or persistence of policies in developed contexts. It could also be posited that high levels of SDG awareness in broader society could provide political parties with the motivation to incorporate the SDGs into their internal processes. This, in turn, could significantly enhance the coherence of national development priorities with the SDGs. When viewed in this way, SDG awareness-raising is not to be considered as a subcategory of "stakeholder participation" (OECD, 2017: p.32). Neither should these stakeholders be restricted to groupings such as "international and regional organisations, local authorities, business and industry, civil society, science and academia" (OECD, 2017: p. 32). If the SDGs are to be incorporated at the source of the policy priority-setting process, levels of SDG awareness and commitment amongst the general public—in urban and rural settings—seems to be the starting point.

6 CONCLUSION

In this article, interviews with policymakers in South Africa were used as the primary source of information to identify how PCSD should be strengthened to improve policy coherence in

developing countries. In this way, the article aimed to take the policy coherence for development debate beyond the conventional donor–recipient relationship. Our findings have been clustered together as follows:

1. The National Development Plan should be used as the point of reference for creating coherence with the SDGs.
2. Institutional issues, specifically a lack of accountability and efficiency, impede on policy coherence.
3. The skills mismatch in capacity development interventions should be addressed.
4. Party politics should be engaged.

Based on these findings, we recommend the following:

Findings	Recommendations
1. The NDP should be used as the point of reference for creating coherence with the SDGs.	a. Use The NDP to prioritise SDG targets. b. Establish and use the same mechanism to coordinate SDG and NDP implementation.
2. Institutional issues, specifically a lack of accountability and efficiency, impede on policy coherence.	a. Develop programmes specifically aimed at improving efficiency in government. b. Consider punitive measures for departments that do not adhere to the SEIAS process or coherence driven by DPME.
3. The skills mismatch of capacity development interventions should be addressed.	a. Fill policy coherence knowledge gaps amongst political principals. a. Critically review existing capacity development interventions. b. Use policy-makers' “on the job” challenges to improve training curricula. c. Include the private sector to increase efficiency and relevance of capacity development interventions. d. Focus capacity development interventions on practicalities of policy delivery.
4. Party politics should be engaged.	a. Create awareness of SDGs and policy coherence imperatives in party political structures.

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