



LOUIS MEULEMAN

Member, UN Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA); Leuven University, Wageningen University & Research, University of Massachusetts Boston

17 April 2018

# It Is About Time to Promote Policy and Institutional Coherence for the SDGs

<http://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/guest-articles/it-is-about-time-to-promote-policy-and-institutional-coherence-for-the-sdgs/>

## STORY HIGHLIGHTS

The SDGs are designed as “indivisible” and this means that each Goal needs the involvement of several or many sectors at several levels.

In a paper I wrote as member of the UN Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA), I suggest combining nine different approaches to promote coherence for implementation of the SDGs, and I outline ten recommendations.

----

One of the best examples of the need to improve policy coherence for sustainability is the mistake of considering biomass combustion inherently “carbon neutral.” We know now that this ignores the fact that using land to produce plants for energy means that this land is not producing plants for other purposes. If bioenergy crops displace food crops, this may lead to more hunger ([EEA Scientific Committee, 2011](#)).

Fostering policy and institutional coherence is a great challenge: implementing the SDGs requires a well-functioning public administration and re-focusing of public sector reform programmes, at all levels of government. This is now more urgent than ever. The SDGs are designed as “indivisible” and this means that each Goal needs the involvement of several or many sectors at several levels. For example, tackling air pollution in cities combines SDGs 3 (health), 7 (energy), 9 (industry and infrastructure), 11 (cities), 13 (climate), 16 (institutions) and 17 (partnerships), and requires action at local, regional, national and even international levels. Incoherence can result in governance failure with high social, economic and environmental costs.

Improving policy and institutional coherence are different but they are two sides of one coin, the coin of implementing the SDGs. Coordination and integration are usually the approaches people mention first, but there are many more “means of implementation.” In a [paper](#) I wrote as member of the UN Committee of Experts on Public Administration ([CEPA](#)) – the UN

body advising on public administration and governance – I suggest combining nine different approaches to promote coherence for implementation of the SDGs.

*Coordination* (1) is structured cooperation, for example between ministries or with parliaments. *Integration* (2) means taking into account another policy or merging policies into packages (e.g. into “circular public procurement”) or connecting institutions, while *alignment* (3) is about mutual adaptation of policies and institutions through formal or informal collaboration.

*Multi-level governance* (4) is structured collaboration between administrative layers. This is important because one government level not functioning properly can block a whole implementation chain. Striving for *compatibility* (5) is a promising approach to make conflicting policies and institutions collaborate while maintaining their respective characters. Compatibility is an alternative for assimilation or “integration” of different cultures of governance. *Reconciliation* (6) means giving due priority to resolving conflicts, while achieving better collaboration. This is essential because incoherence is often the result of political or administrative conflicts and power asymmetries.

*Capacity-building* (7) includes coaching/training and creating ownership for policy and institutional coherence, both within governments and in relation to stakeholders. More fundamental, *public-sector reform* (8) may be necessary to achieve sufficient coherence. This is about changing the form, structure and/or culture of public sector organizations, driven by the aim to implement the SDGs in an effective way – a reform objective that should replace the current focus on efficiency and cost-saving as this often generates ineffectiveness. Last but not least, *empowerment* (9) is about mandating people to work together across or beyond departments and levels, which is a pre-condition to changing mind-sets and “teaching silos to dance” ([Niestroy & Meuleman 2016](#)).

The CEPA paper ends with ten recommendations, which can be summarized as follows:

#### *Principles for better coherence*

1. Promote policy coherence always in synergy with promoting institutional coherence.
2. Adapt coherence measures to the SDGs and to the context in which they will be implemented. The principle of “common but differentiated governance” ([Meuleman & Niestroy 2015](#)) fully applies to policy and institutional coherence.
3. Involve the private sector, civil society and the academic world in concrete action for the promotion of coherence, as they are indispensable partners with essential knowledge about what works where and when.

#### *Planning, design and implementation for better coherence*

4. Develop national work programmes for the promotion of policy and institutional coherence, which are synergistic and do not undermine each other, with a mechanism to monitor effectiveness.
5. Because there is no one-size-fits-all approach, it is advisable to combine multiple approaches to the promotion of coherence, including the nine approaches mentioned above. They should be considered in a synergistic way.
6. Combine various concrete tools that promote coherence-, using “tool boxes” from different governance styles: hierarchical (regulatory), network (collaboration) and market (efficiency/incentives) governance. The three families of tools express different and sometimes contradicting, but in principle complementary, cultural values, traditions and assumptions.
7. Redirect public sector reform to perform on the SDGs, and in particular on policy and institutional coherence, with the motto “reform to perform.”

#### *Learning for better coherence*

8. Introduce a global peer-to-peer learning tool for the promotion of coherence, financing the travel and accommodation costs of experts from one country who are willing to advise another country through expert missions, study visits or small workshops. It could be based on existing

peer-to-peer tools (e.g. two recent European Commission tools on [environmental implementation](#) and [regional policy](#)).

9. Establish a global network (community of practice) of national coherence promotion coordinators. This would accelerate mutual learning and the exchange of good practices and failed attempts among those who are responsible at the national level for progress on coherence. Peer coaching programmes could be developed among governments from different countries. Coaching, also by professional advisors and consultants, could become the new standard to accelerate policy and institutional coherence. Existing networks could be involved, such as the Centre of Excellence for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States (COE). Use existing [OECD guidance](#) (2016/2017).
10. Training is the basis: national public administration schools should integrate the promotion of coherence for the SDGs as a priority in their curricula. Other schools and universities should join this effort.

Policy and institutional coherence is a fuzzy and complex, even “wicked,” challenge but the indivisibility and urgency of the SDGs make it imperative to work harder on it. There is no excuse not to do it, as “everything seems impossible before it is done” (Mandela). What I hope is that the recommendations will find sponsors among UN Member States and other organisations. The discussion paper is not written to be shelved.