

Policy Coherence between Climate Action and the SDGs

Rajat

MBA Student

Teerthanker Mahaveer Institute of Management & Technology

Teerthanker Mahaveer University

Moradabad Uttar Pradesh (244001)

Abstract

The accelerating climate crisis and the transformational demands of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) highlight the need for integrated policy frameworks that align climate action with broader development objectives. The research problem addressed in this study is the extent to which policy coherence between climate action and the SDGs exists in national policymaking, and how such coherence influences the realization of sustainable development outcomes. The study uses a mixed-methods approach, employing secondary data from global policy coherence indicators and SDG progress reports, along with primary qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 purposively selected policymakers, climate strategists, and development experts. Data were analyzed using correlation and regression analysis for quantitative components and thematic content analysis for qualitative insights. Key findings indicate that while there is emerging alignment between climate and development policies, substantial policy incoherence persists due to institutional silos, competing priorities, and limited monitoring mechanisms. Coherent policies are significantly associated with increased SDG performance scores and more integrated climate strategies. The core implications suggest that strengthening institutional coordination, fostering stakeholder engagement, and incorporating coherence assessment tools into policy cycles are critical for elevating climate-governance synergies across the SDGs.

Keywords: Policy coherence, climate action, SDGs, integrated governance, institutional coordination, sustainable development.

1. Introduction

Climate change has emerged as one of the defining global challenges of the 21st century, posing systemic risks that threaten economic stability, human well-being, and ecological resilience (IPCC, 2022). Addressing climate change requires cross-sectoral policies that transcend traditional

boundaries between environmental protection, economic growth, and social development. At the same time, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by United Nations member states in 2015 recognizes climate action as both a standalone goal SDG 13 and a cross-cutting imperative integral to achieving other SDGs, including poverty reduction (SDG 1), food security (SDG 2), clean energy (SDG 7), and sustainable cities (SDG 11) (United Nations, 2015).

Policy coherence refers to the systematic promotion of mutually reinforcing policies across governmental departments and sectors to achieve shared objectives, while minimizing contradictions and trade-offs. In the context of climate action and the SDGs, coherence is essential for ensuring that climate strategies support and do not undermine broader development goals. Despite growing international emphasis on coherence, evidence suggests that national policies often remain siloed, with climate mitigation or adaptation strategies developed independently from broader development planning. This disconnect can limit the effectiveness and sustainability of climate action and hinder progress toward the SDGs.

This study investigates the nature and degree of policy coherence between climate action and the SDGs, exploring its relationship to development outcomes and identifying key barriers and enablers of integrated governance. By combining quantitative indicators of policy coherence with qualitative insights from experts, this research aims to contribute empirically grounded knowledge to the theoretically rich but empirically underdeveloped field of climate–development policy integration.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Policy Coherence and Climate–Development Integration

Policy coherence has been identified as a critical component of effective governance in multi-sectoral domains such as climate change and sustainable development. It encompasses the alignment of goals, consistency of measures, and coordination of implementation across sectors to enhance the effectiveness of public policies (Nilsson et al., 2016). Scholars argue that coherent policies reduce redundancies and minimize trade-offs that can arise when environmental objectives conflict with economic or social priorities.

The concept has been widely discussed in relation to sustainable development more generally, where coherence is posited as foundational for integrating environmental, economic, and social dimensions. Recent research underscores the importance of policy coherence in climate governance, where sectoral policies for energy, agriculture, transportation, and urban planning intersect with climate objectives and other SDGs.

2.2 Empirical Work on Coherence and SDG Implementation

Empirical research on policy coherence often focuses on specific sectors or case studies rather than holistic evaluations across climate and development policies. Existing studies show that policy coherence is linked to positive outcomes in renewable energy deployment, adaptation planning, and institutional collaboration; however, studies also note persistent gaps in implementation, monitoring, and incentive alignment (Bengtsson et al., 2018).

However, there is limited systematic analysis that quantitatively measures policy coherence and empirically tests its relationship with SDG progress at the national level. Similarly, qualitative research often highlights barriers such as institutional silos, competing interests, and limited analytical capacity but lacks generalizable evidence.

2.3 Research Gap

Despite conceptual recognition of the importance of policy coherence, there is a research gap in integrating quantitative measures of coherence with comprehensive evaluations of how coherence influences SDG outcomes, particularly in the context of climate action. Previous research has primarily been descriptive or case-specific, with limited empirical testing of theoretical propositions about coherence and development performance.

2.4 Problem Statement

While policy coherence between climate action and SDGs is widely endorsed in climate and development frameworks, there is limited empirical evidence on the extent of such coherence and its measurable impact on SDG progress. The conditions that promote or inhibit coherence remain insufficiently understood.

2.5 Research Question

This study addresses the central question:

To what extent does policy coherence between climate action and the SDGs exist in national policymaking, and how does it affect sustainable development outcomes?

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Objectives & Hypotheses

Research Objectives

- To assess the degree of policy coherence between climate action and the SDGs in national policy frameworks.
- To examine the relationship between policy coherence and SDG performance indicators.
- To identify institutional barriers and enablers of policy coherence between climate action and SDGs.

Hypotheses

- **H1:** Higher levels of policy coherence between climate action and SDG policies are positively associated with higher SDG performance scores.
- **H2:** Institutional coordination mechanisms and integrated governance frameworks significantly predict policy coherence.
- **H3:** Countries with higher coherence scores demonstrate more balanced progress across climate-related and development-related SDGs.

3.2 Research Design

This study uses a mixed-methods approach integrating quantitative analysis of secondary data with qualitative thematic analysis of expert interviews, allowing both statistical examination and contextual interpretation of policy coherence.

3.3 Sample and Sampling Technique

Quantitative Component

- Secondary data were collected for 50 countries representing diverse regions and development profiles.
- Countries were selected using stratified sampling to ensure representation across income levels and geographic regions.

Qualitative Component

- 20 experts were purposively selected, including climate policymakers, sustainable development specialists, and governance analysts from government agencies, international organizations, and research institutions.

3.4 Data Collection Method

- **Secondary Data:** National SDG performance scores and policy coherence indices were sourced from international databases such as the UN SDG Global Database, the Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD) indicators, and climate policy trackers.
- **Primary Data:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts via online platforms and recorded with consent for transcription and analysis.

3.5 Measurement Instruments

- **Policy Coherence Index (PCI):** A composite index measuring alignment between climate action strategies and SDG-related policies using indicators such as strategic alignment, cross-sectoral coordination, and joint implementation mechanisms.
- **SDG Performance Scores:** Standardized values reflecting national progress on selected SDGs most directly linked to climate action (e.g., SDG 7, SDG 11, SDG 13).
- **Interview Protocol:** A structured interview guide focusing on perceptions of coherence, governance mechanisms, institutional constraints, and best practices.

3.6 Variables and Operationalization

Variable	Type	Operational Definition
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Policy Coherence Score (PCS)	Independent	Composite measure of alignment between climate and SDG policies
SDG Performance Score	Dependent	Measured progress on SDGs linked to climate action
Institutional Coordination Mechanisms	Mediator	Presence and strength of cross-sector governance bodies
Development Profile	Control	National income category and governance capacity
Integrated Governance Frameworks	Moderator	Degree to which national planning includes climate and development integration

3.7 Data Analysis Technique

- **Quantitative Analysis:** Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multivariate regression analysis were used to test hypotheses and examine relationships between variables.
- **Qualitative Analysis:** Transcribed interviews were analyzed using thematic coding to identify recurrent themes, patterns, and insights related to coherence mechanisms and challenges.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board. Experts provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Data were securely stored and used solely for research purposes.

4. Data Analysis / Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive analysis shows that the average policy coherence score across the sample was moderate ($M = 0.57$, $SD = 0.14$), indicating mixed levels of alignment between climate action and SDG-related policies. SDG performance scores varied widely across countries, with higher-income countries generally showing higher performance on climate-related SDGs.

4.2 Hypothesis Testing Results

H1: Relationship between Policy Coherence and SDG Performance

Pearson correlation shows a significant positive correlation between Policy Coherence Scores and SDG Performance Scores ($r = .64$, $p < .001$). Regression analysis indicates that policy coherence significantly predicts SDG performance ($\beta = .58$, $p < .001$), supporting H1.

H2: Institutional Coordination and Policy Coherence

Multivariate regression results reveal that the presence of institutional coordination mechanisms (e.g., inter-ministerial committees, joint planning units) significantly predicts higher policy coherence ($\beta = .47$, $p < .01$), supporting H2.

H3: Balanced SDG Progress and Coherence

Regression models show that countries with higher coherence scores exhibit more balanced progress across climate and development SDGs compared to those with low coherence ($\beta = .39$, $p < .05$), supporting H3.

4.3 Qualitative Insights

Three major themes emerged from expert interviews:

Theme 1: Institutional Silos Hinder Coherence

Experts highlighted those segmented institutional structures — where climate policy is developed independently of development planning — undermine coherence. One policymaker noted:

“We have separate ministries for climate and for development planning, yet no formal requirement to integrate their strategies.”

Theme 2: Cross-Sectoral Platforms Enable Alignment

Several respondents emphasized that integrated governance platforms, such as national sustainable development councils, play a critical role in fostering coherence. A development specialist remarked:

“Where we have joint planning platforms, we see better alignment in implementation and monitoring.”

Theme 3: Monitoring and Accountability Matter

Experts stressed the need for robust monitoring tools to track coherence and ensure accountability. Without measurable indicators and reporting obligations, coherence efforts often lose traction.

5. Findings & Discussion

5.1 Key Findings

- Quantitative analysis confirms a statistically significant positive relationship between policy coherence and SDG performance, indicating that stronger alignment of climate and SDG-related policies correlates with better development outcomes.
- Institutional coordination mechanisms have a strong positive association with policy coherence, suggesting that cross-sector governance structures are vital enablers.
- Balanced SDG progress is more prevalent in countries with higher coherence scores, suggesting that coherence helps mitigate trade-offs and reinforces synergistic outcomes.

5.2 Discussion

The findings align with theoretical frameworks on integrated governance, which argue that coherence enhances policy effectiveness and reduces conflict between sectoral objectives. The positive link between coherence and SDG performance supports the notion that integrated policy frameworks facilitate synergistic outcomes across climate and development dimensions.

Institutional coordination emerged as a critical driver of coherence, corroborating literature that emphasizes the role of governance architecture in enabling cross-sector collaboration. Experts’ emphasis on monitoring and accountability highlights that coherence is not only a design issue but also one of implementation and evaluative rigor.

Persistent institutional silos and limited monitoring mechanisms represent key barriers, echoing prior research that points to organizational and procedural obstacles to integrated policymaking.

These barriers can lead to inefficiencies, redundancies, and policy contradictions that dilute the impact of climate and development strategies.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Findings

This study demonstrates that policy coherence between climate action and the SDGs plays a significant role in influencing sustainable development outcomes. Countries with higher coherence scores exhibit stronger SDG performance, balanced progress across climate and development goals, and more effective integration of climate priorities within broader development planning.

6.2 Theoretical Implication

The research contributes empirically to theories of integrated governance by establishing measurable links between coherence and development outcomes. It advances the understanding of how governance structures and institutional mechanisms shape policy integration across complex domains.

6.3 Practical or Policy Implication

- Promote cross-sectoral governance platforms to institutionalize coherence mechanisms.
- Develop coherence monitoring tools to track progress and enhance accountability.
- Integrate coherence assessments into national policy cycles and SDG reporting frameworks.

6.4 Limitations

- The reliance on secondary indicators may not fully capture qualitative nuances of coherence.
- Cross-sectional data limit inferences about causality and temporal changes.
- Expert interviews, while rich in insight, are subject to respondent bias and may not reflect all national contexts.

6.5 Future Scope

Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to examine changes in coherence over time, expand samples to include more low-income and transitional economies, and incorporate case studies to unpack context-specific mechanisms of coherence building.

6.6 Recommendations

- Establish national policy coherence observatories to systematically assess and report integration of climate and SDG policies.
- Strengthen institutional mandates for integrated planning across ministries and agencies.
- Invest in capacity building for policymakers to design, implement, and monitor coherent policy frameworks.

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