

# The politics of coherence

## What seven years of research revealed about aligning climate action and sustainable development

---

SEI brief  
May 2026

Adis Dzebo

### 1. Introduction

This brief synthesizes the core findings and conclusions from the ClimEQ and Climate-SDGs projects, funded by the Swedish Research Agency Formas and jointly implemented by SEI (HQ, Africa, Latin America), the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), Linköping University, Utrecht University, University of Fiji, University of Canberra, Centre for Poverty Analysis (Sri Lanka), University of Philippines and WWF South Africa.

The brief first discusses how the two projects assessed and operationalized policy coherence between the Paris Agreement and Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals. It then outlines the challenges that countries are facing in coherently balancing their global commitments with their domestic priorities. The brief also highlights the work done to connect the research to decision-making, and provides a bibliography of key publications produced under the projects.

### 2. The view from 2015

Taking stock from the consequential year of 2015, when the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs were adopted, our work was animated by a critical reading of the dominant discourse on coherent climate action and the 2030 Agenda. We found the framing to be almost wholly positive, anchored in the notion of synergies and co-benefits through institutional improvements, and largely silent on the trade-offs that arise when countries translate their global commitments into domestic policy. There was little guidance on how to navigate tensions in policymaking or manage consequences arising from climate and sustainable development policies.

Two framework papers carried that criticism forward – one on the causes of (in)coherence and one on its consequences. In Shawoo et al. (2023) we argue that the dominant framing of policy coherence was overly technocratic, and that its focus on intra-governmental processes has crowded out the more pertinent question of the political drivers of coherence, the vested interests and ideologies that encourage or inhibit efforts to achieve it. The paper proposes an analytical framework structuring

---

the analysis of **ideas** and **interests** alongside traditional **institutional** framings, and these “three i’s” became the analytical backbone of everything that followed.

In the subsequent paper, Browne et al. (2023) took the same critical reading from process to outcomes, and their consequences. A systematic review of 40 peer-reviewed studies found that coherent policymaking did not reduce inequality in a majority of cases, and in several made it worse; a finding that directly challenged the foundational assumption that coherence is a necessary pre-condition for progress on the SDGs.

Together, the two papers established the working proposition that coherence is politically produced and has distributional consequences, and set up the empirical analysis that followed.

### 3. Nine countries, one framework

The step from framework to implementation began earlier, with Shawoo et al. (2020). This brief presents a summary of pilot analyses in six of the countries later at the core of the project – Germany, Kenya, the Philippines, South Africa, Sri Lanka and Sweden later complemented by Fiji, Colombia and Australia – taking the climate agenda as its starting point and mapping synergies and conflicts with the SDGs.

Inequality (SDG 10) surfaced in every country as a dominant cross-cutting concern. The pilot studies established that coherence could not be evaluated in the abstract, and instead had to be traced through the politically charged issues that were shaping the context for implementation in each country.

The empirical program then expanded to nine countries with different geographies, political economies, levels of development, and levels of fossil fuel dependence. In each case a local research team applied the framework to a politically charged issue, including:

1. The transition from coal to renewables in Germany
2. A just energy transition in South Africa
3. Deforestation strategy in Colombia
4. Agriculture policy shifts in Sri Lanka
5. Green growth and labour in Philippine agriculture
6. The impact of renewable energy zones on the equitable and just scale-out of renewable energy in Australia
7. Interaction between agriculture and tourism in Fiji
8. A just energy transition in Kenya
9. Sweden’s regional mobility policy debate.

In each case, specific details sharpened the general argument. In Colombia, Lobos Alva and Cárdenas (2024) traced how Operation Artemisa, launched in 2019 as a military-led anti-deforestation strategy, criminalized campesino farmers and long-settled Amazonian occupants as drivers of forest loss, turning coordinated enforcement into coerced displacement. The report shows how current mining legislation emerged

---

as the single policy most in conflict with the country's otherwise largely synergistic deforestation and land-use framework.

In Sri Lanka, de Alwis et al. (2024) showed how the 2021 overnight ban on chemical fertilizers, imposed by the government and implemented with no transition period or safety nets, led to a collapse in paddy yields and rural incomes among smallholders in Ampara and Kurunegala, with bureaucratic institutions unable to either scrutinize the decision in advance or resist it once taken. In Kenya, Muhoza et al. (2025) examined the just energy transition against the country's long-standing coal-for-development framing, in which expanded fossil-fuel capacity has been cast as the fastest route to industrialization and reducing poverty. The report traced how competing priorities across climate ambition, energy access and distributional equity structured whose voices shaped the transition and whose were sidelined.

Across all nine cases, coherence failed for the same reason: political inequality of voice, representation, treatment and influence proved as consequential as any institutional design flaw. Powerful interests did not want coherence to succeed, and technocratic fixes did not change that. A complementary ideational reading, developed by Gottenhuber (2025) on the Swedish domestic aviation case, showed that even where coherence is formally achieved at national level, it can legitimize a business-as-usual framing around growth and widen the implementation gap at the local level.

## 4. Mapping and assessing interaction between global climate policy and the SDGs

In parallel, global analyses complemented the country stories, giving the project a wider frame.

The first global analysis, on connections between countries' nationally determined contributions and the Sustainable Development Goals (NDCs and SDGs), began with Janetschek et al. (2020), which made the global empirical case for policy coherence. A content analysis of climate activities in 164 NDCs against all 17 SDGs established that climate plans are, in effect, partial sustainable development strategies, with connections concentrated in a handful of SDGs around energy, land, food, cities and water and only marginal engagement with SDG 10 on reduced inequality. That analysis rested on [NDC-SDG Connections](#), the tool developed earlier by SEI and IDOS, the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (Brandi et al. 2019; Dzebo et al. 2023).

In ClimEQ, we extended the tool by coding the second round of updated NDC submissions, more than doubling the data points available for analysis. Dzebo, et al. (2023) used the enlarged base to compare first and updated submissions and found that updated NDCs are longer, more detailed, and carry notable gains in activities on gender, inequality and inclusive participation, even as the social dimension of energy transitions and several environmental links to food, water and land have weakened.

The commentary by Hermwille, Dzebo, Iacobuță and Obergassel (2023) in *Nature Climate Change* carried the implication into the Global Stocktake itself, arguing that

---

an SDG lens on the Stocktake and a climate lens on the SDG mid-term review were indispensable if either agenda was to recover ambition.

A parallel work stream moved from mapping connections to assessing interactions between the goals themselves. Iacobuță et al. (2022) in *Global Environmental Change* examined the extent to which climate-related official development assistance reported by OECD DAC members aligned with recipient countries' priorities as expressed in their NDCs, using SDG-categorized data, and whether the adoption of NDCs had improved that alignment. They found substantial alignment between donor allocations and recipient NDC activities at the SDG level, but weaker correspondence at the SDG-target level. This alignment did not improve in the post-Paris period compared to the pre-Paris period. Although NDCs contained more adaptation than mitigation activities, donors continued to allocate more finance to mitigation, though the gap narrowed after 2015. Moreover, low-income countries received only 14% of the finance despite a proportionally higher share of climate activities in their NDCs.

Dzebo and Shawoo (2023) then applied the SDG Synergies methodology at the global level, imposing a 1.5°C boundary condition on a cross-impact matrix of 21 SDG targets, which was scored by experts from SEI's global centres. Interactions were broadly synergistic, an alignment pattern also confirmed by Jernnäs (2025), with climate finance and ODA and the mainstreaming of climate policy emerging as the two strongest accelerators for progress on everything else. An ongoing empirical paper in the same stream complements this expert elicitation with an indicator-based analysis of climate-SDG interactions, testing whether the theoretically synergistic picture holds up once confronted with observed global data.

SDG Synergies was also used to assess and score interactions nationally. Faus Onbargi and Iacobuță (2026) apply the method to Germany's *Energiewende*, scoring 182 interactions across fourteen energy, climate, environmental and social targets and introducing a temporal protocol that distinguishes short-, medium- and long-term interactions. Synergies dominate, but specific regulatory choices, such as the 1000-metre setback for onshore wind, continue to hold back coherence.

## 5. Cross-country patterns

ClimEQ's scientific output stitches the global and country-level findings into one argument. The two global streams showed that coherence between climate and sustainable development is possible in principle, because NDCs connect to every SDG, and in broad terms climate and development finance tracks the same priority SDGs, while interactions between SDG targets are mostly synergistic under a 1.5°C boundary condition.

The nine country cases, however, showed why that principle so rarely materializes in practice. A forthcoming paper on drivers offers the comparative analysis of causes. It consolidates the nine case studies into a single matrix of political and institutional drivers of incoherence, organized around structural asymmetries and the relative dominance of interest-groups, as well as participation deficits,

---

domestic resource constraints, and fragmented and poor cross-level coordination. Three findings stand out:

- Incoherence is near-universal across the case countries, whatever the region or income level. Its properties are both political and institutional.
- The drivers are predominantly political in high-income countries and manifest early in the policy cycle at the agenda-setting stage.
- Institutional weaknesses matter most in lower-resource settings and manifest primarily during implementation where capacity needs are the greatest.

Complementing this analysis, Browne et al. (2026) is the sister analysis on the consequences side, and as a comparative empirical study of policy coherence, it is the first paper of its kind.

Drawing on 208 interviews across the case study countries, analysing benefits, burdens and affected social groups from climate and sustainable development policies, it finds coherence six times more likely to be associated with benefits than burdens, incoherence nine times more likely to produce burdens, and vulnerable groups 3.5 times more likely to bear those burdens than to benefit. Coherence supports the marginalized only when political will is present; in its absence it can entrench injustice, most starkly illustrated by the Colombian case on militarized anti-deforestation.

Finally, Dzebo et al. (2025), in the journal *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, complements the two comparative studies by situating the projects' findings in the broader literature on policy coherence. It argues for a sequential model of coordination, coherence and integration, that establishes these concepts as three sequential and interdependent stages rather than being treated as synonyms. The paper concludes that coherence is necessary but insufficient for successful and equitable outcomes.

The conclusion on which the collection of ClimEQ publications converge is that political framing is the binding constraint on equitable implementation. Unless countries confront entrenched political barriers, institutional costs and systemic complexity in efforts to balance global commitments with domestic priorities, they will not be able to deliver equitable sustainability outcomes.

## 6. Working with decision makers

Research findings can only have as much impact as their audiences allow. ClimEQ has deliberately invested in taking its evidence to the decision-makers who design and implement these agendas, with a program of policy engagement that spans the institutional architecture of both the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda.

The project convened or co-organized four side-events across various UN Climate Change Conferences of the Parties, alongside two events at the UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in New York, anchored by Science Day at HLPF 2023, which SEI co-organized with UNDP, the International Science Council, Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) and UN DESA, to bring scientists and policymakers together around SDG acceleration.

---

A dedicated training program on climate and SDG interactions for senior officials extended that engagement from convening to structured capacity-building, through two editions of the UNOSD Executive Training Course in Incheon. The May 2024 edition welcomed 20 member states to a training session on integrated planning, co-delivered by SEI, the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES), the NDC Partnership and UN regional commissions. The 2025 training, coordinated by SEI, deepened national capacity on finance, data and stakeholder engagement for NDC 3.0 and closed with country call-to-action plans.

There are two further streams of policy engagement. The first, via the UN Expert Group on Climate and SDG Synergy, culminated in a thematic report on policies that support both climate and SDG action, written by Adis Dzebo (Nilsson et al., 2024), on behalf of the Expert Group and delivered to UN-DESA and UNFCCC. The second stream extends the argument beyond the climate-SDG nexus to all the Rio conventions, including the 2025 academic submission to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). This has brought the project's political reading of coherence into the CBD negotiations, mapping trade-offs between the energy transition and biodiversity, defending high-integrity nature-based solutions, and arguing for a formal Joint Work Programme across the three conventions as well as two publications making an argument for stronger integration between climate change, biodiversity and land-use (UNEP 2025; BfN et al. 2025).

In anticipation of the debate about the post-2030 goals, ClimEQ's empirically grounded conclusion that implementing the two global agendas – on which a sustainable, equal and resilient future depends – is not a technocratic exercise; it is a political project about who wins, who loses, and who gets to decide. ClimEQ's lasting contribution is to put that question, with evidence behind it, at the centre of the conversation on what comes after 2030.

## 7. Summary of key findings

- Policy objectives are overwhelmingly synergistic in every context studied, yet incoherence persists, exposing that the problem lies not in what policies say but in how coherence is understood and pursued.
- Coherence encompasses both the process through which policies are formulated and implemented, and the outcomes they produce for different groups.
- Coherence should account for both political and institutional drivers and consequences.
- Coherence does not fail primarily because of poor coordination – it does so because dominant discourses, vested interests, and power asymmetries shape what counts as coherent in the first place.
- Fossil-fuel interests drive incoherence in every country case studied with significant fossil-fuel dependence, though the channels of influence differ by context.
- Ideas frame what is even debatable, and the prioritization of economic growth over environmental and social objectives is the single largest driver of incoherence across all income levels.
- Political inequality is a distinct driver of procedural injustice, and participation deficits cascade from upstream policy design into downstream distributional harm.

- 
- Coherence is not a neutral good. Colombia's Operation Artemis is the cautionary case: a highly coordinated anti-deforestation policy that militarised enforcement against Indigenous and rural Amazonian communities.
  - Coherence is six times more likely to be associated with benefits; incoherence is nine times more likely to be associated with burdens.
  - Vulnerable groups bear the burdens of incoherence; elites capture the benefits of failed coherence.
  - Temporality is a missing dimension of coherence assessments – static assessments hide temporal mismatches between policies operating on different timescales.

### **Global architecture: what role for NDCs?**

- Updated NDCs are moving in the right direction, slowly, but the framing remains technocratic.
- NDCs are partial development plans: implementation of climate pledges will directly shape SDG progress and vice versa, making institutional silos indefensible.
- Climate ODA broadly matches NDC priorities at the SDG level, but not at the target level, and alignment did not improve after Paris. There is agreement on *where* to spend resources, but not *how*.

### **Post-2030 Agenda: what role for coherence?**

- A successor framework must move from the politically comfortable language of synergies to transparent engagement with distributional consequences, making explicit whose priorities count, which trade-offs are acceptable, and who bears the costs when coherence fails or is captured by dominant interests.
- Coherence gains are only as durable as the government that adopts them. A post-2030 architecture needs ratchet mechanisms, legally anchored commitments, and crisis-proof review processes that lock in progress across political cycles.
- The current framework addresses coherence within countries but not between them. A post-2030 architecture must build in accountability for cross-border spillovers so that the costs of incoherence in one jurisdiction are not externalized onto the most vulnerable elsewhere.

---

## Bibliography

### Selected academic publications, by type, produced under the ClimEQ and Climate-SDGs projects

#### Syntheses

Browne, K., Dzebo, A., Shawoo, Z., Cardenas, M., Chalaye, P., Faus-Onbargi, A., Muhoza, C., Nicdao, P., Ndlovu, N., Niles, N., & Singh, P. (2026). National policy coherence counts for reducing inequality in global climate and development agendas. *Sustainable Development*. Advance online publication.

Dzebo, A., Shawoo, Z., & Browne, K. (2025). Does policy coherence make national implementation of global sustainability agendas more successful? *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-111523-102337>

#### Theoretical/analytical concept papers

Browne, K., Dzebo, A., Iacobuta, G., Faus Onbargi, A., Shawoo, Z., Dombrowsky, I., Fridahl, M., Gottenhuber, S., & Persson, Å. (2023). How does policy coherence shape effectiveness and inequality? Implications for sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda. *Sustainable Development*, 31, 3161–3174. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.2598>

Chan, S., Iacobuta, G., & Hägele, R. (2021). Maximising goal coherence in sustainable and climate-resilient development? Polycentricity and coordination in governance. In S. Chaturvedi, H. Janus, S. Klingebiel, X. Li, A. de Mello e Souza, E. Sidiropoulos, & D. Wehrmann (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of development cooperation for achieving the 2030 Agenda: Contested collaboration* (pp. 25–50). Springer International Publishing. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-57938-8\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-57938-8_2)

Gottenhuber, S. (2025). The idea of policy coherence: Closing or widening the implementation gap of sustainability objectives? *Critical Policy Studies*, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2025.2599673>

Pickering, J. (2023). Can democracy accelerate sustainability transformations? Policy coherence for participatory co-existence. *International Environmental Agreements*, 23, 141–148. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10784-023-09609-7>

Shawoo, Z., Maltais, A., Dzebo, A., & Pickering, J. (2023). Political drivers of policy coherence for sustainable development: An analytical framework. *Environmental Policy and Governance*, 33, 339–350. <https://doi.org/10.1002/eet.2039>

#### Global level

Faus Onbargi, A., & Malerba, D. (2026). Surveying just transition pathways in global climate policy. *Climate Policy*, 0, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14693062.2026.2623367>

Hermwille, L., Dzebo, A., Iacobuță, G. I., & Obergassel, W. (2023). Global stocktake and the SDG midterm review as opportunities for integration. *Nature Climate Change*, 13, 1002–1004. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-023-01813-2>

Iacobuță, G. I., Brandi, C., Dzebo, A., & Elizalde Duron, S. D. (2022). Aligning climate and sustainable development finance through an SDG lens: The role of development assistance in implementing the Paris Agreement. *Global Environmental Change*, 74, 102509. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2022.102509>

Jernnäs, M. (2025). Resolving climate action and inequality in tandem? A global review of states' climate pledges to the Paris Agreement. *Earth System Governance*, 26, 100289. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esg.2025.100289>

#### National and subnational level

Faus Onbargi, A., & Dombrowsky, I. (2025). Political inequality and impacts on climate mitigation: The case of Germany's energy sector. *Applied Energy*, 393, 125928. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apenergy.2025.125928>

Gottenhuber, S., Carlsen, H., Linnér, B.-O., & Weitz, N. (2025). Operationalizing indivisibility—Synergies and trade-offs in six Swedish municipalities' work with the 2030 Agenda. *Sustainable Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.3422>

Hägele, R., Iacobuță, G. I., & Tops, J. (2022). Addressing climate goals and the SDGs through a just energy transition? Empirical evidence from Germany and South Africa. *Journal of Integrative Environmental Sciences*, 19, 85–120. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1943815X.2022.2108459>

Pickering, J., & Chalaye, P. (2025). Can renewable energy zones become regional equity zones? Policy coherence and social equity in the Electricity Infrastructure Roadmap in New South Wales, Australia. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 130, 104415. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2025.104415>

#### Tools for decision-making

Babis, W., Cabre, M. M., Dzebo, A., Martelo, C., Salzano, C., Torres Morales, E., & Arsadita, F. (2024). *SEI AI policy reader*.

Dzebo, A., Iacobuță, G., Lühr, S., Brandi, C., Janetschek, H., Lambert, C., Savvidou, G., Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), & German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS). (2023). *NDC-SDG connections 2.0*. [https://doi.org/10.23661/NDC-SDG\\_2023\\_2.0](https://doi.org/10.23661/NDC-SDG_2023_2.0)

UNEP (2025). *From silos to synergies: Linking planning, finance, and monitoring for coherent action on climate, biodiversity, and land*. <https://www.unep.org/resources/report/silos-synergies>

Wagner, A., Smith, A., Fajardo, P., Seddon, N., Lucey, J., Malhi, Y., Grace, M., Soterroni, A., & Challender, D. (2025). Submission of views and options on enhanced policy coherence on biodiversity and climate change from members of academia and research. University of Oxford. <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:c4c6db16-f1ec-4da9-b4f2-4a8003f6e731>

---

**Published by**

Stockholm Environment Institute  
*Visiting address:* Textilgatan 43  
*Post and deliveries:* Virkesvägen 1A  
120 30 Stockholm, Sweden  
*Tel:* +46 8 30 80 44

Copyright © 2026 Stockholm  
Environment Institute. This  
work is licensed under Creative  
Commons Attribution 4.0  
International.

To view a copy of the licence, visit  
[creativecommons.org/licenses/  
by/4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0)

**DOI:**

<https://doi.org/10.51414/sei2026.014>

**Author contact**

[adis.dzebo@sei.org](mailto:adis.dzebo@sei.org)

**Editor**

Tom Gill

**Layout**

Richard Clay

**Media contact**

[ulrika.lamberth@sei.org](mailto:ulrika.lamberth@sei.org)

Visit us: [sei.org](https://sei.org)

**Stockholm Environment  
Institute is an international non-  
profit research institute that  
tackles climate, environment  
and sustainable development  
challenges.**

**We empower partners to meet  
these challenges through cutting-  
edge research, knowledge, tools  
and capacity building. Through  
SEI's HQ and seven centres around  
the world, we engage with policy,  
practice and development action  
for a sustainable, prosperous  
future for all.**