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Wicked problems and policy coherence in Global Britain: lessons learnt from the UK context on achieving the SDGs

Abstract

Understanding the challenges and opportunities of policy coherence when dealing with wicked problems is a particularly relevant approach to policy analysis. Coherence and complexity condition each other in the context of the different policy domains, jointly offering an enabling debate angle to account for and unbox policy success and failure. A complexity perspective invites an analysis of the interdependencies between the different elements of a system (Argyris & Schön, 1996). This is very similar to the ambition of policy coherence of promoting synergies between policy domains in order to encourage policy success (Nilsson et al., 2012). The current chapter looks at the nexus between policy coherence and complexity, analysing lessons learnt from the UK context while aiming to fulfil policy commitments related to the policy goals of the Sustainable Development Framework. Looking at the UK's policy journey includes analysing the ambitions of the UK as a European country with global presence, aiming for policy coherence and integrating, for example, its security, defence, development and foreign policy strategies, through the Integrated Review, therefore creating the institutional arrangements for materialising ambitions across different policy domains.

The analysis developed here uses an outward perspective to understand how a complexity reading of the UK's efforts for achieving the SDGs can unveil an understanding of how and if its nature as a global governance actor within the Sustainable Development Framework has changed in significant ways and which are the potential related challenges.

Key words: **sustainable development, wicked problems, complexity, policy coherence, Integrated Review**

Introduction

Governing wicked problems – the nexus between complexity and policy coherence

In an increasingly complex global policy environment, a growing strand of the public policy literature has focused its efforts on analysing how policy problems have become harder to deal with by the different governments around the world because of their complexity. Such policy issues can be regarded as wicked policy problems, which differently from tame problems are ambiguous and contested (Rittel and Webber, 1973; Van Bueren et al., 2003; Termeer et al., 2015). They are 'subject to multi-layered interdependencies and complex social dimensions' (Candel et al., 2016, p. 789). Wicked problems require intense cooperation between a high number of policy actors, and introduce novel governance challenges (Serban, 2021). One of the main governance challenges is related to policy coherence across policy domains. The high level of uncertainty involved by these policy problems together with the 'fragmentation of policy systems fosters [...] disjointed policymaking' (May et al., 2006, p. 381). As Peters and Wright highlighted (2001, p. 158), governing wicked problems comes with the additional complexity of needing to manage 'the problems of fragmentation, sectoralisation and policy interdependence'. Wicked problems governance has been portrayed as in need to 'find ways to incorporate potentially conflicting or incommensurable types of knowledge from diverse and often locally dispersed sources' (Daviter, 2017, p. 572), being thus in need of reinforcing organisational learning mechanisms (Serban, 2022).

Therefore, when aiming to cope with the complexity of wicked policy problems, policy actors have been asked to address the increased demand for policy knowledge. It is in this context that network and collaborative governance are presented in the wicked problems literature as governance approaches harnessing the use of broader sources of information helping to deal with complexity by encouraging policy actors to reach out to and incorporate views from a wide range of stakeholders (Roberts, 2000; Weber and Khademian, 2008). Collaborative arrangements are seen as ways 'to gain access to fragmented and local knowledge, mobilise dispersed resources, and build up legitimacy through the construction of common purpose and communal problem-ownership' (Daviter, 2017, p. 574). Thus, collaborative settings appear as particularly enabling policy tools (Janis, 1972; Janis, 1982; 't Hart, 1998; Feldman et

al., 2006; Jordan and Schout, 2006; Barr and Mintz, 2018). When emerging within specific institutional structures, such collaborative endeavours are presented as well equipped to ‘incorporate and institutionalise consideration of more, rather than fewer, dimensions of the issue’ (Baumgartner and Jones, 2015, p. 49).

Closely related to network governance, a second widely debated governance response is the whole-of-government approach, aiming for policy coherence and joined work across government departments (Christensen and Lægreid, 2007; Christensen and Lægreid, 2008). This is seen in the related literature as leading to the emergence of policy networks. Being labelled as cross-cutting policy issues, wicked problems are considered in this context as ‘primed for a joined-up solution’ (O’Flynn et al., 2011, p. 246). Therefore, this governance approach to wicked policy problems wants to avoid departmentalism in order to allow effective cross-sectoral problem-solving (Kavanagh and Richards, 2001), accounting for a systemic perspective (Jervis, 2012).

Looking at how policy actors can cope with policy complexity and aim for policy coherence across policy domains, the current chapter analyses how and if the UK has built suitable governance arrangements for dealing with the wickedness of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Sustainable development, in general, and the SDGs, in particular, have raised the need for governments across the world to look for coherent policy approaches when dealing with the most pressing issues of the 21st century (Alexander et al., 2022). In this context, the UK’s renewed institutional arrangements and strategies such as the Integrated Review are analysed as a pilot case study showing how building a nexus across policy domains (for example, a nexus between security, defence, international development and foreign policy) can impact the ability of policy actors to deal with wicked policy problems. The UK is a relevant country case study given its governmental focus on incorporating complexity tools into policymaking. Recent publications such as the guidance on *An introductory systems thinking toolkit for civil servants* published in 2022 and republished in January 2023 show how the government conceives the connections between different policy domains and encourages the use of a complexity perspective by civil servants in the different Departments. In this context, the UK Integrated Review is one of the policy documents in which an attempt is made by the UK Government to connect policy domains that can enable the achievement of SDGs as wicked and therefore interconnected policy problems. This makes the document a relevant

case study through its institutional implications and a policy laboratory for testing out and learning about the challenges of working across policy domains while advancing with the SDGs agenda.

The first part of this chapter proposes a conceptual approach that connects policy coherence concepts with the literature on wicked problems. The subsequent part looks at how the establishment of renewed institutional arrangements aimed to help steering the complexity of SDGs in the UK context. This includes examples such as the UK Integrated Review in the context of the SDGs as a case in point and an attempt to set up adequate institutional designs and policy tools to manage the wickedness of the related policies. The final part includes the concluding reflections and opens a space for discussing the implications of such institutional development for the UK as a global governance actor within the SDGs framework, looking at its capacity to manage decision-making and effective policy implementation in relation to the SDGs.

Conceptual framework for analysing the UK's SDGs context

This section builds on the conceptual approach proposed in the Introduction chapter by the editors of the current book (Lippi and Tsekos, 2023). The section narrows down the theoretical elements used for analysing the UK case in the SDGs context. It builds on two main strands of the literature: policy coherence and wicked problems. Concerning policy coherence, scholars have analysed it as a policy process that can arguably be deployed to reinforce the nexus between policy objectives and implementation modalities, encouraging policy synergy (Shawoo et al., 2022) and integration (Biermann et al., 2009; Nilsson and Weitz, 2019). Analytically, policy coherence can be understood as being conditioned by policy interactions that constitute the policy input, identifying 'how different sectors or ministries relate to each other in terms of their respective [policy] objectives, and on what topics negotiations are required to manage trade-offs'. This first policy stage is then connected to a process of policymaking integration accounting for 'institutional procedures, structures and rules that enable integrated policymaking processes'. The third policy stage looks at

assessment and impact of policy measures as experienced by different policy audiences (Nilsson and Weitz, 2019, p. 254).

In connection to the ambitions of policy coherence, the literature on wicked problems offers insights on the policy capacities that need to be developed by policy actors to avoid siloed governance and transform institutional arrangements and policy tools (Nilsson and Persson, 2017). The analytical capacity relates to 'the cognitive dimension of policymaking where actors accumulate data and evidence' (Denis et al., 2022, p. 2). This is well connected to the policy input stage of the policy coherence literature, involving the sources of knowledge to be used in the policy process. This stage might be limited by competing interests, institutional priorities, as well as limited technical capacity for collecting evidence, leading into changes across the subsequent policy capacities and limited governance readiness based on evidence.

The second policy capacity is the operational capacity that emerges as interlinked with the analytical capacity, involving the use of knowledge or evidence that was previously collected and aiming to develop concrete policy measures to achieve specific policy objectives. The operational capacity can also be connected to the policy integration process mentioned by the policy coherence literature and invites a reflection around the policy tools that could be deployed to achieve the established objectives through policy integration. While breaking down silos is important for policy coherence, in the context of wicked problems, the input stage is conditioned by the ability to account for the needed expertise. Therefore, a complexity approach is deployed at the institutional level, with policy tools such as systems thinking, foresight and cross-departmental cooperation within governments being used as examples of specific policy tools within such a policy environment (Nilsson & Persson, 2017). This capacity is conditioned by policy actors, and by the ways in which competing interests and/or limited technical ability to collect the needed evidence get to limit the analytical capacity and, through this, the operational capacity of dealing with complexity. Systems thinking or cross-departmental work might indeed have a limited contribution to the operational capacity when there are, for example, conflicting interests or limited evidence, thus conditioning governance readiness based on complexity.

The last capacity needed to deal with wicked problems is the political capacity, managing to reach out to and involve a wide range of stakeholders to support the acceptability and legitimacy of policy decisions (Denis et al., 2022). The political capacity appears as connected

to both assessment processes as a policy stage of the policy coherence literature, and to network governance as a relevant policy tool for collecting the needed information (Roberts, 2000). Governance readiness based on deliberative governance is also conditioned by the previous capacities, including institutional contradictions or limited agency by some of the policy actors involved in the use of the related policy tool, that is, in this context, network governance.

These capacities for dealing with wicked problems together with the policy stages highlighted by the policy coherence literature can be placed together when adapting the drivers identified by Shawoo et al. (2022), looking at ideas, institutions and interests as the core blocks for policy coherence needed in the context of sustainable development ambitions. Ideas ‘guide actors’ behaviour and influence their strategic approach to (in)coherence’ while ‘institutions (such as coordination mechanisms between ministries) [and] the distribution of interests’ (Shawoo et al., 2022, p. 4) condition the ways in which sustainability policies can be implemented. In this context, ideas and institutions are connected to interests which can relate to economic objectives or can have the objective of pursuing political power (Schirm, 2016). This connection also leads to what Lodge and Weigrich have coined as ‘governance readiness [involving] preparedness and the ability to solve problems’, including the ability to develop coherent policy strategies (2014, p. 18).

The connections between these conceptual elements which are deployed in this chapter to perform a reading through complexity lenses of the UK’s journey to achieving the SDGs are highlighted in the table below.

	Ideas	Institutions	Interests
Policy stage	Policy interactions (<i>input</i>)	Policy integration (<i>process</i>)	Policy assessment (<i>output</i>)
Policy capacity	Analytical capacity	Operational capacity	Political capacity
Policy tools	Use of policy evidence	Foresight and systems thinking	Network governance

Governance readiness	Governance readiness based on policy evidence	Governance readiness based on complexity	Governance readiness based on deliberative governance
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Table 1 – Ideas, institutions and interests when dealing with wicked policy problems (Source: own synthesis)

Governance readiness is highlighted in Table 1 as having three different features: readiness based on policy evidence, complexity or systems thinking, and deliberative governance preparedness. These three dimensions of governance showcase instances of governance agency by different policy actors. While governance readiness is presented in relation to institutions, given the need for institutional tools to be used in order to cope with complexity, the deployment of such tools will be carried out by policy actors, whose presence might lead into additional complexity arising when, for example, veto players might influence the use of evidence and the operational capacity in the policy integration stage.

Finally, before moving into applying this conceptual framework to the UK’s journey, pursuing the achievement of its commitments to the SDGs agenda, we need to acknowledge and briefly reflect on the nexus between policy coherence and the governance mechanisms needed for dealing with wicked problems. This nexus is not one without inherent tensions. Policy coherence might not always be seen as a desirable policy objective, given that whenever a dominant policy actor exists (for example, a ministry or governmental agency), that policy actor can overrule the content within the specific policy domain (May et al., 2006). Thus, other actors might face limitations when trying to propel their policy influence and consolidate coherent policy approaches through which their ideas can be accounted for. Moreover, while breaking down silos is ‘a slogan often invoked in the 2030 Agenda discourse, [it] is a likely dangerous strategy [given that] sectoral expertise is [still] necessary to build coherent policies’ (Nilsson & Persson, 2019, p. 259).

Policy coherence might also be severely limited when ‘policies are formulated by different government ministries and departments that hold different values, worldviews, and areas of prioritisation’ (Shawoo et al., 2022, p. 6). This means that policy silos might be hardly

avoidable given the institutional and value related differences between the various ministerial structures or governmental departments (Kingdon, 2002; Pickering et al., 2015).

Another dimension related to the link between policy coherence and the complexity of wicked problems is the one related to unintended consequences. Unintended consequences are seen in this context as 'long-term or secondary effects of an action [that] differ from the intended effect' (Jervis, 2012, p. 393). They become a source of unpredictability given the complexity of wicked problems, leading in turn to questioning the impact of policy coherence. That is because, while potential negative unintended consequences are aimed to be avoided through a coherence approach, policy coherence ambitions might limit, for example, the number of actors considered under network governance. This means that, by limiting the number of interests that get to be represented when deploying governance readiness based on deliberative governance, potential negative unintended consequences and related experiences showcased by policy actors or stakeholders do not always get to be acknowledged under a coherent policy approach.

Policy coherence and complexity of the SDGs agenda in the UK context

Policy coherence has been presented in the context of the SDGs as one of the main institutional promises to ensure that the 17 sustainability objectives will be accomplished while avoiding that advancing on one of the objectives could lead to lagging on other policy ambitions of this same policy agenda. More concretely, SDG target 17.14 talks about the need to enhance policy coherence for sustainable development (PCSD) as an 'approach and policy tool to systematically integrate the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development at all stages of domestic and international policymaking' (OECD, 2018, p. 83). This acknowledges the need to account for the interdependencies between the different policy domains considered under the SDGs agenda, while also setting the stage for avoiding potential unintended negative consequences across policy domains. The framework was considered as 'integrated and indivisible' and 'the interlinkages and integrated nature of the Sustainable Development Goals [was seen of] crucial importance' to its implementation (UN, 2015, online).

In order to align their national agendas to the PCSD ambitions, governments from around the world have started to create or adapt existing institutional frameworks that could potentially enable the policy coherence needed ‘to navigate [the] trade-offs between goals in a transparent and equitable manner’ (Shawoo et al., 2022, p. 1). However, such adaptation strategies have encountered a number of challenges that can be thought of as the main barriers to PCSD, including policy processes such as, for example, the coordination between ministries (Persson et al., 2018). When highlighting the importance of PCSD, scholars have stressed that if these strategic contradictions are not dealt with, they can lead into potential implementation gaps and contradictions (Nilsson et al., 2016; Rogge & Reichardt, 2016).

In this context, the current section applies the conceptual framework summarised in Table 1 to the UK journey while establishing renewed policy approaches better fitted for dealing with the SDGs and aiming to achieve the goals related to policy coherence. The sources used for conducting this analysis include several key policy documents published by the UK Government since 2015 when the SDGs agenda was formally adopted, such as the UK Integrated Review and its Call for Evidence, different UK Government documents detailing renewed policy tools such as the use of complexity tools and foresight and futures planning, as well as relevant UK Government documents on the UK progress towards achieving the SDGs, including the first voluntary national review. To refine the understanding of how these different strategic documents relate to each other and to the broader SDGs agenda in the UK context, the analysis was triangulated through participant observation to a series of events between 2021 and 2023 with UK policymakers and scholars working on topics related to the role of the UK as a global actor. Participant observation as a research method allows ‘access to the backstage [policy] culture; it allows for richly detailed description with the goal of describing behaviours, intentions, situations, and events’ (Kawulich, 2005, *online*). The analysis below is based on the information gathered through these different sources of primary data and is structured around ideas, institutions and interests, including under each one of these dimensions a discussion around the policy stage, policy capacity and policy tools, and envisaging consequences for the UK’s governance readiness in relation to SDGs as wicked policy problems in need for a policy coherence approach.

Ideas

Ideas as a source of guidance for governments to achieve the SDGs agenda and of 'influence [over] their strategic approach to (in)coherence' (Shawoo et al., 2022, p. 4) were acknowledged by the UK Government in different forms. The UK's journey to accomplish the SDGs has included a renewed policy discourse around Global Britain, increasing *UK's impact as a force for good* (HMG, 2021a). In this context, efforts were made by the Government to understand policy interactions between different relevant Government Departments for the implementation and success of the SDGs agenda. One of such examples has been the Integrated Review (HMG, 2021a), which offered an empirical context for looking into how foreign policy can be connected with international development and aid policies, bringing security and defence as additional policy domains with which a relevant nexus was identified. The Integrated Review was seen as 'a policy-led, evidence-driven, whole-of-government process' (HMG, 2020, p.1). Through its Call for Evidence, the UK Government aimed for the previous steps to the publication of the final Integrated Review document to build into the process 'the cognitive dimension of policymaking where actors accumulate data and evidence' (Denis et al., 2022, p. 2). Subsequently, this can be argued to contribute to consolidating the analytical capacity of the Government at the policy input stage. At the same time, the Call for evidence could also be looked at as a policy tool used for collecting evidence, for example, around how the UK can 'change its governance of international policy' and what would be the 'key opportunities, challenges, threats and vulnerabilities facing the UK' (HMG, 2020, p. 1).

Once published, the Integrated Review was aimed to provide a first strategic answer towards

a more integrated approach [supporting] faster decision-making, more effective policymaking and more coherent implementation by bringing together defence, diplomacy, development, intelligence and security, trade and aspects of domestic policy in pursuit of cross-government, national objectives (HMG, 2021a, p. 19).

Additionally, the Integrated Review was seen as based on a logic of policy integration, thus being able to

make more of finite resources within a more competitive world in which speed of adaptation can provide decisive advantage. It is a response to the fact that adversaries

and competitors are already acting in a more integrated way – fusing military and civilian technology and increasingly blurring the boundaries between war and peace, prosperity and security, trade and development, and domestic and foreign policy. It also recognises the fact that the distinction between economic and national security is increasingly redundant (HMG, 2021a, p. 19).

Concerning the way in which these renewed policy ideas should be used for achieving policy coherence when dealing with the SDGs agenda, the Integrated Review presents the UK Government as aiming to

remain a world-leading international development donor, committed to the global fight against poverty and to achieving the UN SDGs by 2030 [by] support[ing] others to become more self-sufficient through trade and economic growth and increase[ing] [UK's] ability to achieve long-term change through combining diplomatic and development expertise (HMG, 2021a, p. 20).

UK's Government policy efforts towards achieving policy coherence can be seen here as an attempt to break silos and establish governance readiness based on evidence and policy synergy that could provide better fitted responses to the wickedness of sustainability policy problems. The Integrated Review appears in this context as a strategic document providing the policy context justifying why and how new institutional arrangements and related processes of policy integration could translate promises of policy coherence into mergers across policy domains. In this particular case, policy coherence is aimed to connect the UK's ambitions in its global fight against poverty with both diplomatic and development expertise. This is presented as a commitment towards a better suited way of achieving SDG 1 concerning the fight against poverty, with implications across the subsequent SDGs and potentially a good connection with SDG 13 on the fight against climate change and SDG 16 on peaceful and inclusive societies (UN, 2015).

Institutions

Examples of renewed institutional arrangements and processes of policy integration happened mainly through the merger between DFID (Department for International Development) as the UK's Government Department in charge with International Development and FCO (Foreign Commonwealth Office) as the UK diplomatic service. This arguably required deploying the governmental operational capacity, creating renewed 'institutional procedures, structures and rules that enable integrated policymaking processes' (Nilsson and Weitz, 2019, p. 254). In a report by the Foreign Affairs Committee in the House of Commons, policy coherence is envisaged when stating that

the aim of the merger is to harmonise UK foreign and development policy, [so] that the Government does not focus solely on the ODA spend of the FCDO [Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office], but ensures that the new Department has responsibility for the coordination of ODA spending across Whitehall. [However,] the Government [is still] to set out the ways in which ODA spending by other Departments will support the delivery of the UK's international objectives (House of Commons, 2021, p. 14).

A connection with the Integrated Review is established when highlighting that the institutional aims of the newly created FCDO will depend on the final version of the Integrated Review document (House of Commons, 2021, p. 3). Moreover, these new institutional arrangements through the creation of FCDO are acknowledged as also bringing in specific challenges related to the merger between 'two Departments with their own cultures' (House of Commons, 2021, p. 3), therefore holding 'different values, worldviews, and areas of prioritisation' (Shawoo et al., 2022, p. 6). This could in turn limit the success of the newly created department when dealing with both international development and foreign policy issues, with international development potentially being the one losing importance when trade-offs are to be identified against foreign policy. Foreign policy can be seen in this context as the policy domain which could dominate the processes of establishing policy priorities within the newly created (merged) policy domain (May et al., 2006). It means also that policy silos might be hardly avoidable given the institutional and value related differences between these two previously independent Government Departments (Kingdon, 2002; Pickering et al., 2015).

Civil society actors have highlighted that they ‘welcome the government’s prioritisation of the climate crisis and biodiversity loss as their foremost international priority, as well as the explicitly mentioned links between climate change, poverty, instability and conflict. In [the] evidence to the Integrated Review, [...] climate change and environmental degradation [were highlighted] as one of the biggest risks facing the UK’ (Bond, 2021, *online*). However, critiques have referred to how the review will only be able to achieve its ambitions for policy coherence ‘if development is given equal attention alongside the diplomatic, defence, and trade aspects of the review. Otherwise, development and aid would be reduced to tools for achieving these other objectives’ (Bond, 2021, *online*).

Moreover, the merger happened within a broader governmental context in which the use of policy tools was encouraged to account for the wickedness of policy issues, including those related to international development and, therefore, the SDGs. The use of foresight and futures planning is envisaged in the Integrated Review (HMG, 2021a, p. 97) as a policy tool that could build in governance readiness accounting for complexity. In addition to foresight techniques, systems thinking has been proposed by the Office of Science to be deployed by the Departments across the UK Government

when dealing with a complex problem, such as achieving net zero. [That is because] there is no such thing as a correct solution or potentially even one best solution. Different interventions should be developed and compared and defining interventions as such are value judgements that will be evaluated differently by different groups (Office of Science, 2022, p. 43).

The use of systems thinking for sustainability policy purposes was aimed to encourage a deeper understanding and mitigation of unintended consequences. This is closely related to policy coherence given the ambition to avoid negative consequences in relation to specific policy domains, while advancing on achieving policy objectives in other domains. However, the link with policy coherence might also be perceived as a contradictory one when conflicting perspectives are acknowledged and need to be incorporated in the implementation steps, thus opening a space for rather limited policy coherence.

Interests

In relation to interests and impact or results of the UK's efforts towards achieving the SDGs, the national voluntary review conducted in 2019 provides an initial assessment and overview of both how network governance has been consolidated and how the different levels of governance, including devolved administrations, have contributed to the consolidation of the political capacity. Political capacity is understood here as the ability to reach out to and account for the policy input coming from a wide range of policy stakeholders in order to support the acceptability and legitimacy of policy decisions (Denis et al., 2022). The UK's implementation strategy of the SDGs is portrayed in this context as accounting for the devolution settlements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, each of them being 'responsible for implementing [their] own policies in areas of devolved competence, resulting in approaches that respond to national and local needs' (HMG, 2019, p. 5). Besides recognising the interlinkages between the different goals included on the SDGs agenda, therefore the interdependencies between the different Government Departments beyond FCDO as one of the externally faced departments, the report also highlights that the government recognises that 'delivering sustainable development depends on engagement beyond government, particularly by civil society and the private sector' (HMG, 2019, p. 5). This creates the potential of using network governance as a policy tool, fitted for supporting the accomplishment of the SDGs. In terms of next steps that would be needed to further consolidate the political capacity of the Government, leading to governance readiness based on deliberative governance:

the UK government will review and further strengthen the existing means and mechanisms to oversee its contribution to domestic delivery of the Goals, building on the Single Departmental Plan process. This review will take place as a matter of priority and will examine both official and ministerial level structures. Given the importance of partnership and cross-sector collaboration, an effective mechanism will also be established to enhance stakeholder engagement and cooperation with government in the domestic sphere (HMG, 2019, p. 213).

However, these efforts have not remained without critique. Summarising views coming from the civil society, key points that have been raised in relation to the effectiveness of the use of network governance have been that the mechanism for stakeholder engagement which was

envisaged in the 2019 national voluntary review is yet to be established. This would ensure the success of network governance by incorporating evidence on how the policies designed to address the SDGs agenda have been experienced by citizens nationally and internationally, and if the efforts for policy coherence have achieved their potential, improving connections across policy domains.

Moreover, the link between international aid and trade or investment priorities is seen as affecting policy coherence between domestic and foreign policy. In this sense, the national planning framework (HMG, 2021b) 'missed an opportunity to resolve this through critical analysis about how each government department's plans affect the other, or how domestic policies affect the UK's work internationally' (Whitehead, 2022, *online*). If this link is to be further strengthened, policy coherence can enhance its ability to affect the achievement of the different SDGs, with both a national and an international perspective. This policy approach would look at coherence as a key governance feature not only across policy domains, but also across governance levels (from local to national and international).

Concluding remarks

What are the consequences of how ideas, institutions and interests have evolved in the UK context when aiming to fulfil the SDGs policy ambitions? How can a complexity reading of the UK's role as a global governance actor within the global landscape of sustainability policies unveil policy success and policy failure? This section will briefly conclude on these points while acknowledging and summarising how the UK perspective has accounted for sustainability goals as being wicked problems and has ambitioned to deal with such wicked problems by reinforcing policy coherence across the different Government Departments through key documents such as the Integrated Review.

We should start by first stressing that within the different analytical angles that can be adopted when looking at the UK's strategy for addressing the SDGs, the current chapter has adopted an external focus through, for example, looking at policy changes in relation to international development and aid. While domestic dimensions have been briefly mentioned

when looking at devolved administrations and how a plethora of actors have been considered for monitoring and evaluation purposes, the main discussion was unfolded in an external context looking at the connection between ideas, institutions and interests, and analysing the policy stages needed for policy coherence (input / processes of policy integration / output), policy capacities needed to deal with wicked policy problems (analytical, operational and political) and related policy tools (from evidence to foresight, systems thinking and network governance). This, in turn, was argued as building governance readiness involving 'preparedness and the ability to solve problems', including the ability to develop coherent policy strategies (Lodge and Weigrich, 2014, p. 18).

Through the analysis of the empirical evidence, the UK appears as having accomplished important progress in relation to ideas and institutions, mainly through a solid integration of policy tools needed to deal with the complexity of SDGs as wicked problems. In this sense, the Integrated Review has contributed towards acknowledging the different external policy domains that might need to be integrated if the UK is to consolidate its role as a global governance actor. However, the policy integration process between international development and aid, on one side, and foreign policy, on the other side, has proved a challenging policy task, testing the strength of the FCDO's operational capacity.

In relation to the analysis of interests and the involvement of stakeholders, important tasks remain to be fulfilled, such as, for example, the materialisation of the mechanism for stakeholder engagement (promised in the most recent national voluntary review which was published in 2019). This mechanism could and should include both domestic and foreign audiences. If aiming to step up its ambitions around network governance, and therefore its governance readiness based on deliberative governance, the UK will need to find ways of involving foreign audiences in its institutional arrangements. This will need to appear in more direct ways through both the strategic planning documents and the assessment reports on how much the UK has progressed on its sustainability journey. Adding to this, the National Planning Policy Framework appears as an enabling policy framework to look for policy coherence between the domestic and foreign policy ambitions under the SDGs agenda. Moreover, the next national voluntary review is a document whose publication might shed light on the most recent successes and the remaining policy challenges.

An important implication of this analysis is related to the nature of the identified interests. Even though the study has shown how diverse interests have been faced by the UK Government while implementing policy solutions to achieve the SDGs, solutions identified encourage mostly policy learning between different actors and at different levels of governance. This means that divergence as a source of wickedness was shown here as having a primarily cognitive nature, rather than arising from structural differences that generate incompatible solutions and conflicts. However, when accounting for institutional mergers, we can envisage potential unintended consequences that in the long run might lead to switching from competing to conflicting interests. Yet, the evidence collected in the current chapter does not suggest that such structural differences have emerged so far.

These concluding remarks stress that coherence and complexity can condition each other in the context of the UK efforts for achieving the SDGs. However, coherence between governance levels (from local to national and international) was identified as the next step that is needed to consolidate the efforts made with the ambition of building a nexus between policy domains. These two angles to policy coherence can jointly offer an enabling debate angle to account for and unbox policy success and failure, looking at how policy domains and policy actors connect as part of the broader efforts for policy coherence. The importance of coherence between the different governance levels was identified in relation to interests looking at how different policy actors or stakeholders have experienced policy implementation. Coherence at this level or the lack therefore can provide insights which can be used to understand the reasons for the so-called gap between the ambitious SDGs policy agenda and the limited evidence on the impact of its implementation by actors around the world.

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