

## WRITING SAMPLE

### Policy Coherence & the SDGs: “The communication on this still needs work.”

#### SUMMARY OF THE WORK

While all United Nations member states have signed on to support the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), there exists massive policy incoherence with the Global Goals when evaluated at the local, regional and even national levels. Speakers at the OECD/AFD conference in October 2017 discussed a selection of these inconsistencies and attempted to explain why conflicting policies exist. Ultimately many speakers agreed that the lack of understanding among the general population, as well as regional-level actors, had lead to this policy incoherence. Improving communications on the 17 Global Goals as well as developing campaigns to change attitudes and behaviors were some of the solutions suggested by conference speakers.

#### Context

**Year written:** 2017

**Context:** The OECD’s Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development Unit cohosted a conference with the French Development Agency (AFD) and the OECD’s Economic Affairs Department entitled, “Policy coherence, the SDGs and the UN 2030 Agenda: Grappling with policy interactions and transboundary spill-overs in the global economy.” The conference, held on October 27, 2017 included presentations by speakers from the OECD, the Brookings Institute, the United Nations, the French Development Agency (AFD), the African Development Bank, as well as a variety of academic and civil society organizations based in Bangladesh, China, France, Germany, Italy and Nigeria.

**Conference website:** [www.OECD.org/gov/pcsd/PolicyCoherencetheSDGsandtheUN2030Agenda.htm](http://www.OECD.org/gov/pcsd/PolicyCoherencetheSDGsandtheUN2030Agenda.htm)

**Academic theory:** Evaluation of the conference speeches was accomplished through the lens of local community building and in particular the Asset-Based Community Development approach (ABCD).



## SDGs: "The communication on this still needs work."



Tammy Mayer | Follow

Driving solutions for stakehol...

6 2 0

"The communication on this still needs work," explained Rémy Rioux, CEO of the [French Development Agency](#) (AFD), referring to the UN's [Sustainable Development Goals](#), which aim to eliminate extreme poverty and to achieve worldwide economic, social and environmental sustainability. Many, many other important ideas were shared at the conference, however this brief sentence exemplifies the thread I noticed woven throughout the full-day conference, titled, "Policy coherence, the SDGs and the UN 2030 Agenda: Grappling with policy interactions and transboundary spill-overs in the global economy." ([Agenda and conference videos are on the OECD Policy Coherence website.](#)) Speaking to some of the world's best economists and SDG policy experts, Gaël Giraud, Chief Economist at the AFD took the floor and displayed an impressive level of frankness. He talked openly of the possibility that some of the 17 SDGs are incompatible in a general sense, or incompatible in specific circumstances. As an example, he noted that it may be impossible to achieve both #8 Decent Work and Economic Growth and #10 Reduced Inequalities simultaneously. He also gave an example of when goal #6 Clean Water and Sanitation directly conflicts with goal #7 Affordable and Clean Energy. "And," he said, "We haven't proven that we can increase growth and decrease energy consumption at the same time." "If it's impossible to pursue all 17 SDGs at the same time, then it will be critical to choose **priorities.**"

This is a bold statement to make in light of the global commitment to achieving all 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

However, Mr. Giraud was not the only one to suggest that there was incoherence inherent in the SDGs themselves. Later, Mario Pezzini, Director of the OECD's Development Centre, said, "We cannot have everything be coherent at the same time, therefore we are required to set priorities."

With various economics experts suggesting that the 17 goals cannot be achieved in all areas of the world simultaneously, we can see that **the first level of policy incoherence starts within the SDGs themselves.**

None of the speakers suggested universally eliminating or removing any goals, but several speakers talked of individual countries setting their own priorities among the goals.

The Chair of Economics at the University of Turin and former Italian Minister of Labor, Social Policies and Equal Opportunities, Elsa Fornero, talked of the implications that psychology has had on the field of economics, saying that "**people from different places react differently** to the same ideas and policies." Priorities cannot be set at the international level in a top-down manner, but by the countries themselves.

Mr. Pezzini also shared this idea, explaining that “we need to recognize the individuality in each country of the world,” and that each country needs a unique assessment in order to select its own priorities among the 17 SDGs.

These speakers implied that **a certain amount of policy incoherence is necessary globally because each country will choose its own priorities.** Clearly, a certain amount of flexibility would be needed on the part of policy makers at the international level to account for the variations in policy priorities at the country-level.

Within the context of setting priorities and writing policy, Maria Chatardova, President of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, emphasized the need to “involve all the stakeholders.” Debapriya Bhattacharya, a macroeconomist and public policy analyst, immediately supported Ms. Chatardova’s words, saying efforts for policy coherence must “involve all stakeholders, both for-profit and non-profit, and not exclusively government actors.”

Along the same lines, Kako Nubukpo, Director of economic and digital Francophonie at the International Organization of Francophonie (OIF), proclaimed that the biggest issue is for international aid organizations to listen to what the people in the Southern countries want and prioritize that in the aid provided by the North.

What these speakers seemed to be alluding to is the idea that we shouldn’t collectively ignore certain voices for the sake of policy coherence. As Mr. Bhattacharya said, “coherence should be a guiding principle of Agenda 2030 and not a target.”

Allowing for some policy incoherence and increasing flexibility would help countries achieve the 17 SDGs while being inclusive to all of the world’s stakeholders.

The emphasis on national individuality and nation-level policy prioritizing was a big theme throughout the day, especially as it related to the **incoherence between international policy agendas and national political decisions.**

Hafsat Abiola-Costello, founder and president of the Kudirat Initiative for Democracy gave one of the most compelling speeches of the conference. With humor and openness she talked of the current anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe and of the simultaneous migration of young Nigerians to Europe in seek of better living conditions. She went on to explain that the Nigerians don’t necessarily want to move north, but that, from her perspective, the policies and budgets of wealthy countries were actually designed to push Nigerians from Africa to Europe.

Ms. Abiola-Costello referenced a report about illicit economic flows from Africa and explained that multinational corporations were the source of 65% of those illicit financial transactions. In her speech, she demonstrated that the decisions by European countries and the lack of oversight of multinational corporations created conditions in Africa that encouraged Nigerians to seek new lives in Europe. Ms. Abiola-Costello suggested that **European countries could benefit from aligning national budgets and corporate oversight to the broader goals of international peace and economic stability.**

Regional, national and local level policies must be re-evaluated through the lens of the SDGs and through the lens of other international policies in order for real progress to be made in eliminating poverty and creating a more socially, economically and environmentally sustainable world.

As a perfect example of this sort of incoherence at the domestic level, Eloi Laurent, Senior Economist at the Sciences-Po Center for Economic Research, described the current legislative discussions about the French budget and suggested that despite a verbal commitment to the SDGs, **France prioritizes GDP growth above all else.** To prove his point, he explained that the official documents provided to legislators about the budget only give data points on GDP, rather than indicators about inequality or the environment.

Without considering data points that reflect the priorities set by the SDGs, legislators cannot make budgetary or policy decisions that reflect the SDGs. As a solution to this information gap and as a means of improving policy coherence, Mr. Laurent proposed that legislators be provided an annual report with SDG indicators that relate to the national budget. **With additional information that highlights international goals, national legislators can better see the consequences of certain budget decisions and take action accordingly.**

Catherine Mann, Chief Economist at the OECD, asserted, “**Domestic policy must be the starting point for change.** It is more important than what happens at the international level.”

And Colin Bradford, non-resident senior researcher at the Brookings Institute, echoed Ms. Mann’s views, explaining that there is a need to focus on norm-setting at the domestic level, and stating that “domestic politics needs to drive international politics.”

However, educating politicians is not sufficient to making policy coherent at the country level.

Ms. Chatardova accurately described the stumbling block to national policy coherency: **lack of**

**political will.** In addition, Mr. Bradford asserted that political leadership is needed. In order to achieve the SDGs, domestic support for the goals is fundamental.

When Helmut Reisen, professor emeritus of Basel University and associate fellow at the German Development Institute, criticized the OECD's "Going for Growth" recommendations, saying they didn't go far enough in supporting the SDGs and were not appropriate for low-income countries, Ms. Mann, the Chief Economist of the OECD responded, "**You can't propose policies that have a 0% chance of success.**"

Independent of Mr. Reisen's criticism, Ms. Mann's statement struck me: although country leaders have signed on to the SDGs, intergovernmental agencies are opting to water down their policy recommendations because **full support of the SDGs simply isn't there at the national level.** In other words, while nation-level officials commit to the value of the SDGs, broad domestic political support is lacking for full-scale implementation.

Several of the speakers attempted to explain why the SDGs weren't being fully pursued or adopted at the regional or local levels. Mr. Rioux explained that politicians generally lose interest in conversations about the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) fairly quickly, and later in the day Mr. Bradford, developed that idea further, suggesting that **the SDGs are "too wonky."** In his presentation he suggested that as a way of sharing the 17 goals more easily with politicians and voters, we could group them into five categories of sustainability: social, economic, environmental, institutional, and global. He promoted the idea that we need to change the way we talk about the SDGs.

"They lack a discourse that connects with people," he said. "**The language used is not adequate to mobilize political support.**"

And herein lies the crux of the matter. People do not universally connect with the SDGs. Without the support of voters and citizens of the world, the SDGs will never be achieved, no matter how many extraordinary policies are written by brilliant economists at renowned international agencies.

In his presentation, Mr. Laurent of Sciences Po convincingly argued that in the 21st century, the definition of "structural reforms" should hereafter include this language: "**changing behaviors and attitudes** in order to make production and consumption more sustainable." The hearts and minds of the people must support the SDGs in order for political will to have a chance of existing.

Esla Fornero, professor at the University of Turin and former Minister of Labor, Social Policies and Gender Equality for Italy, explained that, "if there is not a transfer to the people of economic and finance basics, the risk of failure and policy incoherence is very high." She talked at length about **economic and financial literacy (EFL) being an essential dimension of citizenship**, and through her work her goal is to reduce the distance between economic policy experts and the voters.

Changing the behaviors and attitudes of the people of the world is the conclusive answer to policy coherence and ultimately to the success of the SDGs over the long term. Fortunately there is a dedicated group providing communications resources and best practices to governments: [the OECD's DevCom Network](#). Their work to establish coherence for SDG communications efforts is important to build broad level support.

But, as Mr. Rioux said at the beginning of the conference, "The communication on this still needs work."

**The next steps to policy coherence and to achieving the 17 ambitious Sustainable Development Goals must include local- and regional-level communications and an active effort to mobilize the support of voters.**

...

The conference, held on October 27, 2017 and co-hosted by the [AFD](#), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)'s [Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development Unit](#) and the OECD's [Economics Department](#), included presentations by speakers from the OECD, the [Brookings Institute](#), the [United Nations](#), the [French Development Agency](#) (AFD), the [African Development Bank](#), as well as organizations based in Bangladesh, China, France, Germany, Italy and Nigeria.



**Tammy Mayer**  
Driving solutions for stakehol...

Follow

2 comments