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Article

Enhancing Policy Capacity for Better Policy Integration: Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in a Post COVID-19 World

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Abstract: The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the UN, in 2015, established a clear global mandate for greater integrated policymaking, but there has been little consensus on how to achieve them. The COVID-19 pandemic amplified the role of policy capacity in mounting this kind of integrated policy response; however, the relationship between pre- and post-pandemic SDG efforts remains largely unexplored. In this article, we seek to address this gap through a conceptual analysis of policy integration and the capacities necessary for its application to the current SDG situation. Building on the literature on policy design, we define policy integration as the process of effectively reconciling policy goals and policy instruments and we offer a typology of policy integration efforts based on the degree of goal and instrument consistency including: policy harmonization, mainstreaming, coordination, and institutionalization. These forms of policy integration dictate the types of strategies that governments need to adopt in order to arrive at a more coherent policy mix. Following the dimensions of policy capacity by Wu et al. (2015), policy capacities are identified that are critical to ensuring successful integration. This information, thus, contributes to both academic- and policy-related debates on policy integration, by advancing conceptual clarity on the different, and sometimes, diverging concepts used in the field.

Keywords: policy integration; policy capacity; policy design

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1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were created by the UN, to be adopted as a global mandate for policymaking, and were intended to meet a set of highly interdependent set of development targets. The UN member states developed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to deliberately foster an interlinked set of “global goals” [1], building on the experience and lessons learned implementing the Millennium Development Goals, where successful policies were “defined by their effectiveness and the level of integration and coherence with other policies” [2] (p. viii). The SDGs, thus, essentially concretized the role played by policy integration in driving forward sustainable development.

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, constrained the ability of governments across the world to act in such a coherent fashion. For instance, the World Health Organization reported that the pandemic constrained the ability of governments to provide access to integrated health services, which could lead “to a stagnation or even decrease in service coverage” [3] (p. 47). Governments needed to rely on previous experiences and capacities built from previous pandemics to launch “slow but steady and strong responses” to deal with the pandemic [4] (p. 299) and governments whose capacities were already stretched prior to the pandemic tended to be more reactive, adopting a limited set of restrictive policy tools in many areas without necessarily addressing the need for their careful integration [5]. It becomes unsurprising, for example, that the year of the pandemic’s onset “marked the

steepest increase in global billionaires' share of wealth on record", virtually wiping out global progress in meeting the SDG targets [6].

The COVID-19 pandemic, nevertheless, further sharpened the concern for policy integration brought forward by the SDGs. It forced practitioners and academics to rethink many underlying principles about this subject. While integrative strategies, such as mainstreaming and coordination have long been thought to be capable of overcoming the limitations of domain-specific expertise in addressing wicked [7] or boundary-spanning problems [8] such as those covered by the MDGs and SDGs, how to achieve this in practice remains to be unclear. Government programs in developed economies emphasized such concepts as "joined up government" (Pollitt 2003) and "whole-of-government" [9] which had been introduced by New Public Management efforts of the 1990s and 2000s [10]. However, the notion of an integrated policymaking process continues to be one that many governments have continuously aspired for, but for which there is little consensus on how best to achieve it [11,12].

In this article, we propose a framework to better understand policy integration for development from the perspective of policy capacities [11]. Policy integration is defined as the process of reconciling incoherent policy goals and inconsistent policy instruments and pointing them towards more congruent policies. The COVID-19 pandemic sharpened the idea that the capacity to integrate "contributes to a wide-ranging problem solving capacity of governments regarding other complex problems" [13] (p. 54). That is, addressing complex problems such as pandemics and climate change pose the challenge of coordinating multi-sectoral policymaking involving multiple actors and resolving often competing interests without necessarily having the analytical, organizational, or political capacities to do so. The capacities to overcome this "administrative trap" have become even more important in the case of the post-pandemic SDGs, as the pandemic has forced many governments, from across the world with varying levels of development, to bring more actors into various levels of governance, further complicating the policy environment.

Using this framework, the form of integration to be followed in any particular case, and the capacities required to implement it, can be seen to depend on the degree of consistency of the goals and instruments which exist. A variety of possible integrative processes exist such as policy harmonization, mainstreaming, coordination, and institutionalization and these forms dictate the types of capacities that governments need in order to arrive at a more coherent policy mix. Drawing on Wu et al.'s [14] definition of policy capacity as a set of skills and competences necessary for policymaking, in this paper, we identify critical policy capacities linked to the different forms of integration identified. In so doing, we contribute to the public policy literature by providing a systematic understanding of what types of capacities that are needed to create integrated policymaking in the post-COVID-19 world.

2. Policy Integration: Definition, Forms, and Strategies

The COVID-19 pandemic represented the most pressing demand for integrating health and economic policies in many countries, in contemporary times. The economic and social effects of the pandemic necessitated governments to tinker with the complementarity between strict lockdown measures that placed importance on public health and "herd immunity" approaches that favored keeping the economy open [15]. As the pandemic worsened and larger sets of populations became infected, the density and mix of policy tools adopted also intensified, which, in turn, intensified the need to better integrate them and balance multiple trade-offs [16]. More stringent measures such as closures of schools, measures for physical distancing, or outrightly banning concerts and other public gatherings became more prevalent as the pandemic deepened, folding in concerns about education and tourism, to name only two, as the crisis unfolded. Prior experiences with pandemics and the capacity to react quickly largely determined how successful these responses were [4,17].

While policy integration suggests bringing together different sectoral considerations in a coherent fashion, current thinking about the subject reflects how different scholars,

organizations, and governments have used the term and highlight different aspects of effective policymaking. Terms such as policy coherence, coordination, joined up government, or whole-of-government overlap to capture the essence of policy integration.

The literature is not clear, however, on three fundamental questions about policy integration: what is being integrated, what are the forms of integration, and what is required for it to take place? What is being sought to be integrated remains to be an open question because policy integration is often treated both as a means to an end and as an end in itself [17]. Efforts to classify the forms of policy integration have also commonly been limited to a horizontal-vertical integration dichotomy. In addition, lessons learned from policy integration initiatives have been difficult particularly since there is no clear evidence about which processes trigger meaningful reform [18,19].

2.1. What Is Being Integrated?

Broadly speaking, policy integration involves cross-sectoral policymaking that transcends the institutional responsibilities of individual departments (horizontal integration) or which covers different policies within the same unit (vertical integration) [20]. It involves functional coordination that seeks to find interconnected solutions that are often approached separately through distinct policy areas [21]. Thus, it naturally entails the systematic evaluation and recognition of consequences of one policy on another policy [22]. This conceptualization captures the contemporary concern with a general shift towards cross-cutting policy problems that require solutions that go beyond existing policy sectors and administrative silos. This often involves bringing together new actors from other fields not previously involved in a policymaking domain or regime [23]. However, this definition of policy integration does not specify the aspects of policymaking that need to be integrated or how policies can achieve enhanced levels of integration.

In fact, much work in this vein stops at framing integration as a function of changes in institutional arrangements conducive to integrated policymaking, such as enhanced avenues for public participation or stakeholder consultation. Integration efforts, however, can easily fall apart when more or new actors have competing demands and interests [24], constraining the ability of an integrated institutional strategy to reach any level of consistency and coherence in policymaking.

Måns Nilsson suggested that integration should, alternatively, be approached from the perspective of learning, that is, integration in policymaking marks a change in policy frame or perceptions about goals, causal chains, and appropriateness of solutions to problems in a fashion which promotes their more complex interaction [25] (p. 210). Thus, for example, enhanced environmental policy integration can happen when economic or social policies embed sustainability concerns into how policy subsystems analyze problems, objectives, and solutions [26]. Defining policy integration in this way, as a function of learning, expands our understanding of how the organizing ideas about a policy issue often also need to be changed if integration is to occur. More importantly, this adds into the equation the need for better alignment between the means and goals of policy as a critical component of integration. It marks the beginning of the incorporation of policy design considerations into policy integration [12], viewing integration as a dynamic process of change, the speed of which can vary depending upon the types of learning being induced [27].

Candel and Biesbroek, thus, defined policy integration as “an agency-driven process of asynchronous and multi-dimensional policy and institutional change within an existing or newly formed governance system” [28] (p. 217). They saw integration as comprised of four dimensions, i.e., a policy frame, subsystem involvement, policy goals and policy instruments, of which the degree of synchronization indicated the extent to which integration had occurred.

These insights have been built upon by studies which have been even more systematic in conceptualizing the changes in actual practice required for instruments and goals to be integrated [29]. Policy integration has been seen, in these studies, as the process of extending parts of existing policy mixes or replacing an old mix with a new one that better

combines goals and means that otherwise had been addressed separately [30]. The major concern here is to understand how these new policy mixes or combinations of different policy instruments can lead to more coherent policymaking that can more effectively address complex policy goals [31]. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, many governments who had prior experience with pandemics simply extended their existing measures of contact tracing, isolation, and quarantine procedures to a bigger scale but also mixed them with other social protection measures such as cash aid and tax credits. In doing so, the deployment of multiple policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic inherently entailed a need for cross-sectoral and intra-sectoral policy integration, and the degree to which governments were able to achieve such integration remains to be an empirical question. In some ways, the public health goals of pandemic responses were seen as fundamentally in conflict with concerns for self-responsibility, for example, in countries such as Sweden [32], and this determined their rather lax response to the pandemic and an example where health crisis considerations were only harmonized into “normal governance” systems [33].

2.2. What Are the Forms of Policy Integration Relevant to the SDGs?

Conceptualizing integration in this way helps to guide policymakers in pursuing the SDGs. First, the SDGs already frame integration as a strategy of coherent policymaking, in which policies are expected to act in mutually reinforcing fashion. Fragmentation into “policy components”, for example, can undermine coherence as it pulls the decisionmaking of multiple actors in different directions [34]. Second, the SDGs themselves are also expected to serve as a “policy glue”, i.e., a normative framework that organizes policy efforts around a common goal [34,35]. The networked nature of the targets establishes a priori interrelationships among the different goals [1]. Third, the nature of the SDGs requires multiple goals to be pursued and multiple actors to be involved; thus, it mandates strategies to promote both vertical and horizontal integration [36,37], to bring together disparate policy domains and to mandate the participation of subnational governments in the integration process.

Analyzing baseline conditions on the consistency of instruments and goals is, thus, a prerequisite to identify strategies for making policy integration successful [38], particularly under the SDGs. Rather than thinking the SDGs promote a weaker form of integration which only “harmonizes” domains of equal status as initially suggested by some authors [39], the SDGs can better be conceptualized as requiring the creation of coherent and consistent “policy bundles” [40] or “complex multi-level policy mixes” [41], which pose the greatest integration challenges. Not only do the SDGs demand engagement of multiple actors at different levels of governments, including the international community [42], they also require sophisticated policy designs which can take on multiple goals simultaneously or in a planned sequence. Thus, apart from the usual functional inconsistencies, such as between the environment and the economy, these inconsistencies could exist vertically (across scales of policy actors) and horizontally (between the government, civil society, and the private sector).

2.3. How Can Integration Take Place?

Instruments are thought to be consistent when they work together without any significant trade-offs, while goals are consistent when the goals are achievable simultaneously [37]. Table 1 illustrates the forms of integration commonly discussed in the literature on the subject. The “weakest” form of integration, “policy harmonization”, is when the policy sectors that are being integrated have an inherent inconsistency in terms of their goals and instruments. It involves reconciling conflicts between competing instruments and actors [43] and negotiation of the relative status of goals. “Policy mainstreaming” is another form undertaken when goals are inconsistent, but instruments are relatively consistent. Mainstreaming entails incorporating certain new concerns into policy goals, usually, without significantly altering the existing mix of policy instruments. “Policy coordination” is

a stronger form of integration which occurs when goals are clear and consistent across concerned sectors, but the instruments used to implement the policy are inconsistent. Such coordination-based integration emphasizes comprehensiveness, aggregation, and the development of consistency between the objectives and strategies deployed [44]. Lastly, “policy institutionalization” is the ultimate goal which can only be attained when the goals and instruments are both consistent [45].

Table 1. Forms of policy integration.

Consistency of Instruments	Consistency of Goals	
	Consistent	Inconsistent
Consistent	Policy institutionalization	Policy mainstreaming
Inconsistent	Policy coordination	Policy harmonization

Regardless of where the inconsistencies are found (horizontal, vertical, or functional), the type of policy integration pursued has important implications for how coherent policy-making is to be achieved. If contradictions among policies to be integrated are evident, for example, the integration process will require lending greater consistency to the instruments and goals. This change must be deliberate, and involves adopting integrative strategies that will bring multiple actors together to negotiate, deliberate, and agree on actions to be undertaken. More complex problems such as climate change may have greater degrees of inconsistencies in the instruments and goals than urban homelessness. Ultimately, which of these strategies can be adopted, however, is contingent on the degree of consistency of the instruments and goals of the domains concerned and also on the resources and skills available to reconcile or integrate them.

2.4. What Strategies Can Governments Follow to Enhance SDG Integration?

Governments following the harmonization model of policy integration have a few strategies at their disposal to instill greater consistency in their SDG policy portfolio. Several of the earliest identified strategies are, for example, a standard setting where conditions are established primarily at the procedural level for all actors to meet and policy face standardization or uniting policy principles at a common level of understanding [46]. Policy emulation has also been identified as a good way to deal with the uncertainty brought about by differing preferences and values over the policy mix [47]. Harmonization requires a more coercive and obligatory approach considering the inertia often involved in sticking to the traditional domain-based policy preferences. Mandates specifying the form of inter-organizational relationship required by a policy, typically governed by a lead agency [48,49], are often used for this purpose. Lead organizations must have a central position within the government, and sufficient resources and legitimacy to marshal the numerous actors into working together [50]. This approach is particularly appropriate for goals where there is one domain that dominates the process with the goal of reaching a “principled priority” [17]. Governance arrangements with lead organizations are inevitably centralized involving higher levels of political brokerage with other members of the network because of the high levels of competing interests and values [51].

Policy mainstreaming, mainly applied in the issues of gender, environment, and climate change, involves a greater recognition of an issue, otherwise, only dealt with at the margins (see Table 2). Goals are perceived to be in conflict, as in the case of gender equity and efficiency in public services [52]. The same law can be interpreted by different agencies as reinforcing their own interests which would typically diverge from each other. For instance, two main ministries are in conflict with each other on marine affairs in China, as one sees their role as “servants of the fishers”, while the other sees their role as the “owners of the sea” resulting into fragmentation of fisheries management [53]. Thus, strategies for integration are geared towards influencing the ideas surrounding the synergies between conflicting goals. This so-called “integrationist” approach in gender

mainstreaming has largely been the strategy of choice among international development agencies where gender issues are layered into existing development programs without significantly altering policy goals.

Table 2. Integration strategies by forms of policy integration.

	Policy Harmonization	Policy Mainstreaming	Policy Coordination	Policy Institutionalization
Major Integration Strategies	Standard setting Policy face standardization Policy emulation	Regulatory mainstreaming Directed mainstreaming	Bargaining and consultation	Creation of cross-sectoral institutions including ministries and divisions
Mode of network governance	Lead organization	Network administrative organization	Network administrative organization	Shared governance

Beyond organization mainstreaming, Wamsler and Pauleit [54] identified regulatory mainstreaming and directed mainstreaming as complementary strategies for integrating climate change adaptation. On the one hand, regulatory mainstreaming involves modification of inter-organizational planning frameworks, regulations, and procedures. On the other hand, directed mainstreaming involves transfer of resources such as funding, staffing, and expertise to a specific integration problem and creation of new projects. These strategies diffuse the shared responsibility of integration into the members of a subsystem that is compatible to individual goals. The convergence of goals will essentially be incremental and top-down, and could involve the creation of a specialized unit responsible for driving the diffusion of responsibilities [55]. However, given the incoherent nature of goals within the subsystem, the communicative strategies of influencing the agenda and framing the issue becomes particularly important [56,57].

Coordination is the most appropriate strategy when policymakers do not share the same model of matching solutions with problems, as in the case of international macroeconomics [58] and energy policy [59]. Policy coordination pertains to the “development of a clear, consistent, and an agreed set of policies, the determination of priorities, and the formulation of strategies for putting these policies into practice” [60]. Coordination arrangements should advance both negative coordination to avoid and to reduce the effects of negative consequences on other domains by discrete sector-specific decisions [61,62], and positive coordination to jointly deliver services [63]. Coordination does not necessarily involve actors congealing to become institutions solely responsible for specific cross-cutting issues, but information exchange and feedback are crucial [64]. Peters [65] advocated for the use of policy coordination either through bargaining or reconciling conflicting ideas as alternatives to hierarchical arrangements in solving a collective problem, that is, it is a process of “transforming actor’s policy positions into collective action outcomes” by deliberating and bargaining on a common set of instruments [66].

Institutionalization involves the creation of permanent roles or institutions to deal with cross-cutting issues, which Steurer [67] referred to as “polity hardware”. It is a direct way of overcoming specialized, independent decision making by establishing clear lines of authority and channeling resources towards organizations concerned with policies touching upon cross-sectoral issues [68]. For example, National Councils for Sustainable Development have been created in countries around the world to drive the policy discourse on the broader issue of sustainable development with broader participation of non-actors [69]. Schmidt, Gostin, and Emanuel [70] also suggested to introduce departments of public health to move beyond the focus on universal health coverage to policy responses that concerned all relevant sectors as advocated by the SDGs. However, these “institutions” need not be just organizations dedicated to specific issues, rather, they can also pertain to a set of informal and formal mechanisms that are facilitative of coherent policymaking [71].

Institutionalization occurs when goals and instruments are congruent and can solve wicked problems that transcend the boundaries created by traditional policymaking. A relatively stable subsystem and engaged public policies result in, otherwise, ad hoc integrative policymaking, self-reinforcing that is possible to come up with comprehensive solutions [8]. Since the domains are not fundamentally incoherent, arriving at a common set of strategies would typically require a voluntary process of cooperation through a shared governance scheme [64].

2.5. How Can These Strategies Be Achieved? The Role of Policy Capacity

Wu, Ramesh, and Howlett proposed that policy capacity had three dimensions, i.e., analytical, operational, and political, which interact together [14]. These three dimensions are similar to the dimensions identified by Jordan and Lenschow [19], i.e., cognitive, institutional (administrative), and political, as factors that are critical for effective environmental protection integration. The three dimensions are an important categorization of the functions that a government and the relevant non-state actors must perform for policy integration to happen. Apart from exogenous events, such as shocks and conflict and international access to experts and resources, factors that have been identified as crucial for the transition from MDGs to SDGs can be clustered into these dimensions.

The first dimension, analytical capacity, is crucial in generating intelligence to ensure that decisions are technically sound [72,73] and that the policy mixes are logically related [28], which may or may not currently exist in various sectors and countries [74] (see Table 3). Having the necessary analytical capacity allows organizations to generate knowledge about the extent of consistency within domains that are to be integrated, failure of which can cause integration efforts to collapse [20,75]. For example, a suggested analytical precursor to establishing cross-sectoral arrangements is to examine the broader legal and regulatory context of health, including policies related to food, housing, education, the environment, and taxes [70]. In addition, system-level analytical capacity pertains to the scope and quality of system-wide data collection, as well as the availability, speed, and ease of access of data and information crucial to the integration process. Operational capacity can be equivalent to administrative or implementation capacity [76] and is about the ability of the government or sets of agencies to get things done [77]. Getting things done requires this "strategizing ability" which entails being attuned to administrative limitations of existing processes for integration [67].

Table 3. What factors that support and challenge the transition from MDGs to SDGs?

Dimension	Supporting	Challenging
Analytical	Access to information Freedom of press Education in schools	Knowledge gaps Inadequate data
Operational	Consistency of coordination Effective planning agencies and engagement in development of SDGs Using existing planning processes that already integrated SDGs	Silos Corruption Lack of finance and debt Government can enforce SDGs, but will have to facilitate it Lack of transparency
Political	A supportive political system Capacity building for media and civil society Champions	Lack of stakeholder involvement Wealthier people resisting equity Lack of recognition of civil society Moving from consultation to accountability

Source: Report of the Capacity Building Workshop and Expert Group Meeting on Integrated Approaches to Sustainable Development Planning and Implementation (3 July 2015).

The ability of the UN member states to follow any or all of these strategies in order to meet the challenges of the SDGs is contingent upon their resources and skills or their capabilities and competences, and these may be in greater or shorter supply.

Without the analytical or managerial capacities to reconcile the inconsistencies and conflicts in policies needed to undertake successful integration, each runs the risk of generating a policy mix that continues to be suboptimal [38]. More importantly, from a policy design perspective, ascertaining if inconsistencies exist and how these inconsistencies affect the requirements for policy integration requires the capacity to understand the structure of the “design space” in which integration is to occur [29]. This generally pertains to the “room” that governments have to design and introduce new elements into existing policy mixes [23]. The nature of the policy regime, for example, significantly shapes the design space because of the policy legacies and entrenched actors that exist. Governments need the capacities in order to both work with or widen this design space in order to be able to introduce new integrative strategies and to ensure that integration objectives are met [78].

Given how the process of replacing or layering policy elements into a mix has to contend with policy legacies and path-dependent features of policymaking, there is a need for adequate capacities to manipulate the design space towards creating positive feedback for the path that produces the most optimal solutions and that moves the integration project towards higher levels of integration [79]. These capacities can be conceived as governance capacity or the organizational and systemic resources necessary to establish a more coherent policymaking process [80]. This broader governance-oriented definition is preferred over state capacity [81] (p. 352), public sector capacity [76], or the narrower conception of policy capacity [72], as the SDGs go beyond enforcement of rules, implementation authority, or marshalling resources.

The SDGs implicitly promote governance capacity as a means of establishing, promoting, supporting, and institutionalizing relationships between governmental and non-governmental actors in the integration process [82]. The SDGs advocate the redesign of traditional policy mixes, meaning implementers of integration projects are confronted by the legacies of existing policy contexts and administrative traditions and practices, which need to be retrofitted to overcome the path dependent features of old policy mixes [83,84]. Improvement in governance capacity is expected to ease the implementation and amplify the effects of the SDGs [85].

The form of policy integration that needs be pursued has clear implications for the types of capacities that must be developed if these efforts are to be successful (see Table 4). Thus, as highlighted above, when goals and instruments are in conflict, it is necessary to pursue policy harmonization. On the one hand, given the high level of conflict expected in reforming such a policy mix, harmonization would involve the highest amount of analytical, operational, and political capacities. Operational capacity, on the other hand, would facilitate incremental perspectives of strategy development [86] as advocated by Lindblom [61] when goals and tools are not exactly clear. In the context of policy integration, Steurer referred to this as the “configuration approach” to strategic public management that “combines flexibility with systematic planning, facilitating governance, and management cycle” [67] (p. 211). Any goal conflicts typically necessitate significant political capacity, particularly in setting the agenda for policy integration. Too often, studies on the effectiveness of integration strategies have identified a lack of interest shown by politicians [87,88] or the absence of support (or political will) for these integration strategies as important determinants of failure and success [15,89].

Similar to policy harmonization, mainstreaming needs high levels of political capacity because goal conflicts need to be addressed at the level of framing and agenda setting. The difference lies in the low analytical capacity required for this strategy because the changes sought are at the ideational level of policy goals rather than the technical details of instruments. This does not mean that an analysis is not important, in fact, for example, gender mainstreaming has historically argued for the analysis of gender-disaggregated data

to determine the impact of policies on women [52]. However, any government intending to drive policy harmonization needs to bolster operational capacity to bring together various actors to discuss how responsibilities can be diffused more appropriately to avoid contradictions as the result of goal conflict. As previously mentioned, mainstreaming demands greater communicative capacity in order to change the policy agenda [56,57].

Table 4. Forms of policy integration and critical governance capacity.

Consistency of Instruments	Consistency of Goals	
	Consistent	Inconsistent
Consistent	Policy institutionalization (Low political capacity, low operational capacity, low analytical capacity)	Policy mainstreaming (High political capacity, moderate operational capacity, low analytical capacity)
Inconsistent	Policy coordination (Low political capacity, moderate operational capacity, high analytical capacity)	Policy harmonization (High political capacity, high operational capacity, high analytical capacity)

In driving policy coordination, political capacity is not needed as much as with mainstreaming because it “does not absolutely need a whole-government perspective” [90] (p. 230), implying only a limited set of actors to be involved in the integration process. The need for analytical capacity is particularly high, however, because of the need to come up with more consistent sets of instruments, reducing their contradictions by reviewing various options and determining priorities [60]. Operational capacity is required to be at moderate levels because of the need for effective network governance. Coordinating agencies are crucial in the facilitation of agreements and for establishing new networks to coordinate integration processes [91].

Policy institutionalization does not require high levels of governance capacity because the institutions are self-reinforcing. Policy domains that are already integrated do not require high analytical values because negative spillovers and path dependencies are less salient. A certain level of operational capacity allows the integration project to sustain momentum but is not needed at the same level as with the other forms of integration. Political capacity is also no longer highly needed since the policy is already in place [92,93].

3. Conclusions

The conceptual heterogeneity that continues to surround the concept of policy integration suggests it is something that everyone desires to have more of, but no one truly understands what it means [11]. While the world is still dealing with the ripple effects of a global health crisis almost 3 years on, what is clear is that governments must develop their ability to act coherently and swiftly when dealing with increasingly more complex problems. This includes both in terms of pandemic responses and for other large-scale efforts such as sustainable development. In this article, we have discussed policy integration as a concept ripe for more widespread discussion as a key goal in such large-scale efforts. We advance the theoretical understanding of policy integration as the process of modifying existing policy mixes to combine goals and means more consistently. In addition, we demonstrate that policymakers do not operate in a void and require specific types of capacities if they are to enact reforms needed to alter existing policy environments.

As the discussion above has shown, however, achieving integration in the case of the SDG goals or any other such large-scale initiative requires the presence and availability of certain types of resources and skills or competences and capabilities on the part of governments. As the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated, the availability of these capacities and the willingness to deploy these capacities for integrated policymaking remains contingent on political leadership and state-society relationships [4]. Different systems could conceivably vary in their ability and willingness to integrate policies as a response to

complex issues [94], particularly, as processes for articulating goals, choosing instruments, and avoiding conflicts might differ [95]. Maggetti and Trein [15] found that ultimately, policy integration strategies were not determined by “the type of political system or to administrative traditions” (p. 60). As in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, psychological (e.g., elite panic) and strategic (e.g., political coalitions and elections) strategies equally shaped the choice of policy responses and integration strategies [96].

Understanding whether integration should take the form of harmonization, coordination, mainstreaming, or institutionalization establishes a more direct linkage with policy capacity by treating integration as a process of reconciling various policy mixes. Not all policy environments are the same, thus, not all policy integration should be treated the same. Nuance is critical in moving ahead with policy integration, because different sets of capacities are needed to integrate policies at different levels of goal and instrument consistency.

In this paper, it is hoped that the definition of policy integration offered provides clearer direction on how to appraise it and to identify strategies towards its achievement. This is the crucial next step in order to ensure successful implementation of the SDGs. It is empirically imperative to establish the interlinkages of the different SDG targets, which is already being done in many fronts [1,97].

While, on the one hand, the COVID-19 pandemic sharpened the realization of the need for enhanced policy capacity to achieve better integrated policymaking in the health field and could have set a strong precedent for similar analysis and better implementation of the SDG goals, the pandemic response, on the other hand, also demanded capacities that were often missing in many governments [98] and highlighted the difficulties and limitations that existing policy capacities have for better policy integration.

A scholarly focus should now be on identifying and measuring the critical policy capacities for each of the four forms of policy integration listed above and the types of actions that can be taken to bolster their critical policy capacity needs. With this in mind, it is essential to acquire better knowledge on establishing and expanding governance capacity for building policy coherence. Survey methods, for example, may provide greater insights for identifying strong points and weak spots to perform policy functions at various levels of the government [80,99,100]. Conducted at a wider scale, surveys can be used for cross-country or sectoral comparisons which can improve practices and efforts at both the national and the local levels [11].

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